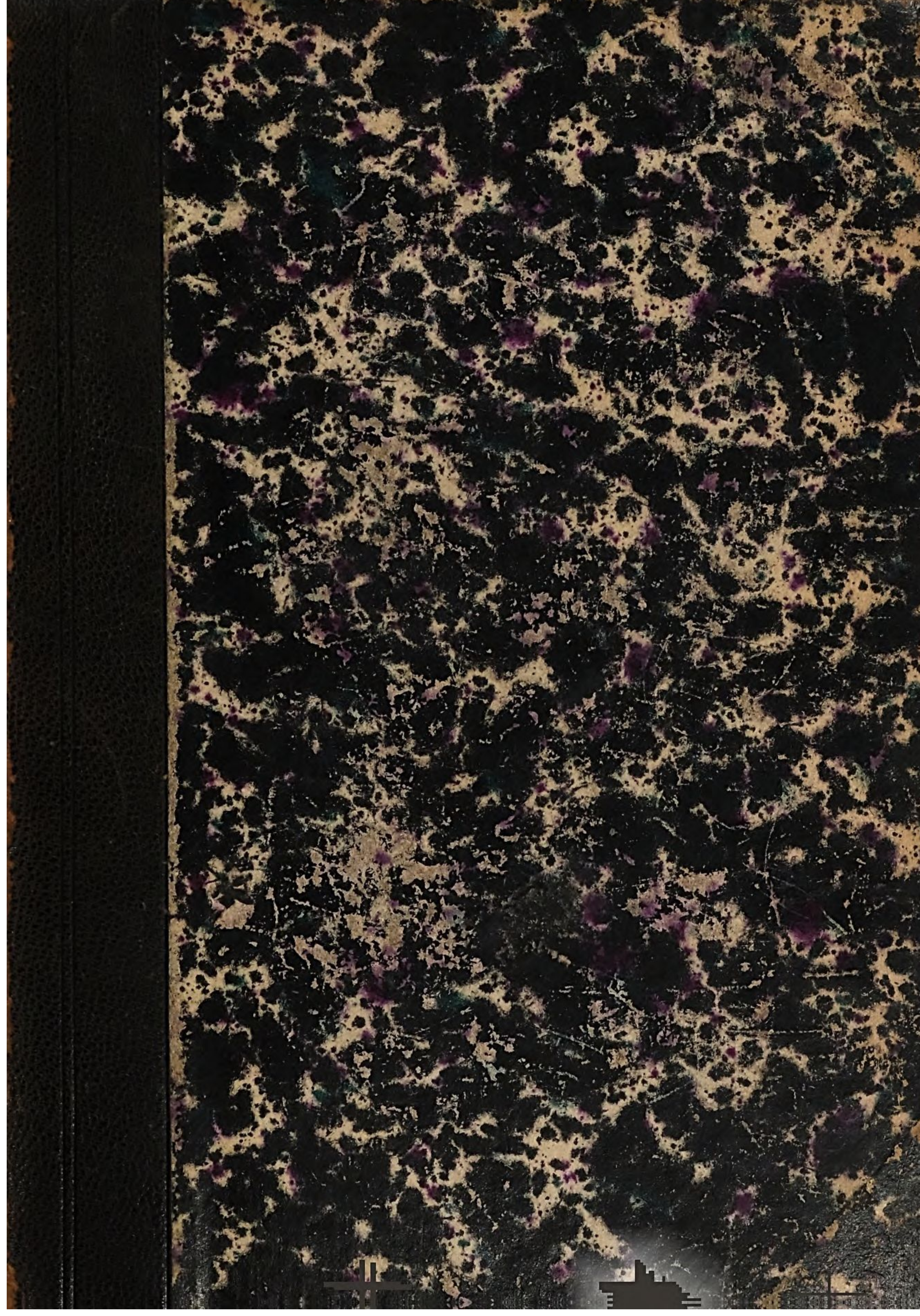




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THE END CROWNS ALL.

A LIFE-STORY.

BY

EMMA MARSHALL,

AUTHOR OF "UNDER SALISBURY SPIRE," ETC. ETC.

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LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1890.



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BOOK I.

“Bring me a constant woman;
And to that woman, when she has done most,
Yet will I add an honour—a great patience.”

SHAKESPEARE.

BOOK I

of the first and second volumes;
and in the third volume the first part
of the first volume is repeated.
The second volume is the same as the first.

THE END CROWNS ALL.

CHAPTER I.

KING'S ACRE.

MR. STEPHEN BOLINGBROKE had led a very retired life, and had never cared to make friends of his neighbours. He had ruled in his own home as an autocrat, and neither his wife nor his daughter had ever attempted to contest anything he wished to have done. Of him it might truly be said—his word was law.

He had held himself apart from a world which neither loved him, nor thought much about him. He had the character of being an erudite scholar and an author, though no one ever could precisely say on what this character was founded. Certain it is, if an author, his books did not appeal to the general reader; and who was there in King's Barton to test his ability as a classical scholar? But, as we all know, reputation for certain qualifications is nevertheless often accepted because it rests on a somewhat sandy foundation.

We are all apt to build up the character of our neighbours according to pre-conceived notions, whether for

good or evil. Hence, when there is a sudden collapse, a thrill of astonishment, by no means justified by absolute knowledge, runs through a little community with electric force. If some great and heroic action is disclosed, as coming from someone we have chosen to label as incapable of such an action, we are full of surprise, mingled with a little vexation, that we are shown to be so far wrong in our estimate of the person in question. If, on the contrary, a sudden blow reveals that one who has been considered *sans peur* and *sans reproche* is found to be mean and unworthy, base, or even dishonest, the astonishment is mingled with some deeper feeling than vexation, and we say we do well to be angry that we were so mistaken or so deceived.

A revelation like this last had been made a few days before my story opens in King's Barton. Mr. Bolingbroke had died suddenly, and left behind him for his wife and children nothing but debts, and, as some said, dishonour.

Creditors swarmed with their claims. The estate of King's Acre was found to be heavily mortgaged; and there was absolutely nothing left for Mrs. Bolingbroke and her children for their future maintenance except an income of two hundred a year, which Mrs. Bolingbroke inherited from her father. The capital from which this little income was derived was tied up for her heirs, and could not be touched in her lifetime. Thus this little was secure when the large fortune which Mr. Bolingbroke was supposed to possess had crumbled into dust.

The point of vision differs about money as about everything else. Mrs. Vane, the rector's wife, thought it absurd to say Mrs. Bolingbroke was in very straitened

circumstances. The living of King's Barton was only worth three hundred a year; and had she not six children to provide for—food, clothes, and education?

"It is a great 'come down' for the Bolingbrokes, who had held their heads so high, and kept so much to themselves," Mrs. Vane allowed; "but to talk about penury and poverty is nonsense!"

"My dear," the rector said, "we must not be hard on the poor Bolingbrokes; it is not kind."

"I am not hard, James; I am only just. I think of my own life, with one servant to get through the work of the house, and the strain it is to keep up appearances, with all your parish claims too. I say the Bolingbrokes are not so greatly to be pitied after all, and especially as there have been some doubtful transactions which have brought the family so low. Well, pride must have a fall, and so Stephanie Bolingbroke has found."

"Mary, you judge her harshly," the rector said. "You always judge her harshly."

Mrs. Vane gave a little laugh.

"I know you are Stephanie Bolingbroke's champion; but you cannot have much to say in praise of Aubrey, with his fine-gentleman airs. He will be a trouble to his poor mother, though he is so soft-spoken and has such pleasant manners. He is a boy I should never trust. There is something sly about him."

It will be seen that the family at King's Acre had not won golden opinions from the rector's wife, nor indeed from people generally in their immediate neighbourhood. The father's secluded life, the mother's fragile health, had been generally accepted as the reason

why King's Acre Park was the great house of the neighbourhood only in name.

Aubrey, a boy of nineteen, was at Eton, or rather had been at Eton till within the last year, when he had left the school—from delicate health it had then been thought.

Since his father's death, and the disclosures which followed it, other reasons had been assigned for it. Unpaid bills and money difficulties seemed to have been present at Eton before they were suspected at King's Acre.

Stephanie had the character of being proud and reserved, and she was not popular in the village. Mrs. Vane, at the rectory; Mrs. Browne, the doctor's wife; Mrs. Field, the wife of the lawyer; the Miss Carrows, the daughters of a gentleman who farmed his own land, all agreed in thinking Miss Bolingbroke proud and haughty; and as she wished to be left to herself they were quite willing to do so.

Stephanie looked very unlike the person Mrs. Vane described her to be, on the cold spring afternoon, when she was seated in her own room before a table covered with papers and books. If pride had had a fall, it must have been broken to pieces thereby. There was no sign of pride in the attitude of utter dejection in which Stephanie sat—her hands clasped on her lap, her head bent, and her beautiful hair falling over her shoulders.

She had been trying to be her own hairdresser that day, dismissing her maid, and saying she must learn to do everything for herself now. The first attempt to gather up these heavy masses of reddish-brown hair

had been unsuccessful; for they were continually falling from their place, and scattering pins upon the floor.

Stephanie was not weeping; her grief lay too deep for that. She had that morning gone through a long interview with their family lawyer, Mr. Swifte, and had learned the full extent of her father's losses. Shame and distress had filled her heart so full that there was scarcely room left for sorrow. The circumstances of her father's death had been so terrible that the blank and loss and natural grief, were almost dwarfed into insignificance.

An over-dose of chloral had been assigned as the cause of death, and "Death by misadventure" had been the verdict of the jury. But a lurking dread, which seemed daily to take a more definite and terrible shape, haunted Stephanie day and night, and the burden was heavier to bear because she could not share it with anyone. To shield her mother from any such dreadful addition to her sorrow, was Stephanie's constant aim.

Presently she gathered up her bills and papers, and prepared to go downstairs to the room which her mother occupied. On her way she was met by one of the servants.

"There's a gentleman in the library, Miss Bolingbroke, who wants to see you."

"Another creditor," Stephanie thought. "You had better tell the gentleman Mr. Swifte sees anyone who comes. He will be here for that purpose to-morrow morning from ten to two o'clock."

Stephanie retreated to her mother's room, glancing as she did so at two men who were taking an inven-

tory in the hall below, and shuddering as she said to Nancy:

"These are the men put in charge by the creditors. We must get away as soon as possible. To-morrow, if I can persuade mother to let me, I must go and look for some lodgings."

Mrs. Bolingbroke was seated by a fire in her own morning room, gazing into it, and now and then wiping away a quiet tear. Aubrey was leaning back in a chair opposite his mother, reading.

"We must get away as soon as possible, mother," Stephanie said; "Mr. Swifte advises it."

"Where are we to go?" Mrs. Bolingbroke asked helplessly.

"I shall go to-morrow to explore the neighbourhood of London, and find a decent lodging till we can settle in a small house of our own."

Again a knock at the door.

"Miss Bolingbroke," the maid said, "this gentleman wishes to see you. He has sent up his card."

Stephanie took the card, and read:

Mr. Albert Hardman,

Lancaster Gate,

Hyde Park.

"He says he wants to see you very particularly, Miss Bolingbroke," as Stephanie hesitated.

"Then I must go, I suppose. Did you give my message about Mr. Swifte?"

"Yes, miss; but he said he did not want to see Mr. Swifte, it was you he wanted to see."

"Very well," Stephanie replied, "I will come. Will you come too, Aubrey?"

"No; that is, unless you want me very much. You know how to speak to people so much better than I do."

Stephanie said no more. Clearly she was the only person to whom her mother and brother looked for everything.

She went slowly down the wide staircase, bowing in answer to the respectful "Good afternoon" of the two men who were examining an old oak chair in the hall, and putting its probable value into a red book, to which a pencil was attached by a string. Stephanie hesitated for a moment at the library door, and at last, when she had turned the handle, she stood irresolute just within the room.

Her movements were so gentle that the large, tall man, who was standing at the bay-window by her father's writing-table, did not notice her entrance.

She advanced towards him, and said:

"You wished to see me, I think."

The man turned round and faced her, saying, in a loud, metallic voice:

"Yes; you are Miss Bolingbroke. I know you, though you don't know me. Come, let us sit down and have a chat; you look as pale as a ghost."

Stephanie shrank back a little, with involuntary repugnance to this loud-voiced man, whose ample waistcoat was adorned with a heavy gold chain, and on whose coarse hands several rings were shining.

"Well, now, I come as a friend, to know if I can do anything for you. You've got a brother, I think."

"Yes," Stephanie said.

"I've several large offices. You know, or you may not know, I am a merchant, deal in plumbago, and many sorts of goods, and, thank goodness, I have had great success in life—very great success; a few hundreds or thousands here and there make no odds to me; and as I hear there's a pretty mess here, made by your poor father——"

Stephanie hastily interrupted Mr. Hardman.

"I do not wish to discuss any of the sad events of the last fortnight with a stranger. You must excuse me from entering upon such painful subjects."

"Well, well, I don't want to add to your trouble, Miss Bolingbroke. I only want to be of use. I'll take your brother and put him in the way of making a fair fortune, if he's steady, mind—steady and honest—and is not too fine a gentleman to sit at a desk. Will that suit your views?"

Stephanie would have given a great deal to be able to refuse to accept anything from the hands of this man, whose eyes were full of bold and undisguised admiration, which was most distasteful to her.

But there was Aubrey, with nothing to do, and evidently in no haste to rouse himself for action. He had been talking in a vague way of getting into the Admiralty, or the Foreign Office, and other unlikely places; but he had the smallest possible chance of obtaining a situation without friends to back his application. Indeed, all he had done since his father's death was to write to two old Etonians, whose fathers, he thought, might help him. And Stephanie knew it was

most improbable that the sons, or the fathers either, would take any trouble on his behalf.

"Now I tell you what, Miss Bolingbroke," Mr. Hardman began, after a pause; for Stephanie did not answer his question. "I tell you what; look here now. I like to be open and aboveboard, you know. I've a little place not far from King's Acre. It's a cottage, you know. There my good mother was born and bred. I ain't ashamed to say I've made my way, and that I was born of humble parents. Well, this little cottage wanted repairs, and I've been down here once or twice looking after it, and, as luck would have it, I saw you riding a bay mare, and I thought you what you are you know, something very much out of the common; to cut the matter short, I take an uncommon interest in you, and when I read in the papers of all this crash, and the death of your poor father, why——"

Stephanie drew herself up, and again interrupted Mr. Hardman. "I think," she said, "all this is very wide of the mark. If you will allow me, I will call my brother, and then, if you please, repeat your proposal to him."

"Very good, very good. I don't say I will give him a big salary to begin with. It wouldn't be fair, you know, to the other young fellows. They'd make the place too hot for him if they thought he was set up over their heads. But I'll see he has a good rise year by year, and——"

Stephanie had reached the door by this time, and Mr. Hardman blundered after her to open it; but she was too quick for him, and he was left alone to meditate on what had passed.

"High and mighty! high and mighty!" he murmured;

"but, lor! what a figure! and what hair! and eyes! She might be a duchess any day of the week. Well, well, patience, my boy, patience. It won't do to drive too hard at first. I'll take the young fellow, and I'll offer her the cottage for a few pounds a year. Lucky I kept it up to please my old mother, and when I marry she shall come back to it. Change tenants, eh!"

Mr. Hardman chuckled over this last sentence, and repeated it as if it were a good morsel, smacking his lips as if afraid to lose the flavour. "Change tenants, eh! Change tenants! My lady at Lancaster Gate, and the mother in her little cottage—a bijou residence; that is the right thing to say, isn't it now? But patience, my boy, patience!"

While Mr. Albert Hardman was indulging in these castles in the air, Stephanie had gone swiftly upstairs, and called Aubrey from his mother's room.

"I want to speak to you, Aubrey," she said. "A man, a gentleman, is downstairs, who is ready to take you into his office. He will give you a salary, and I think you had better close with it."

"Who is he? What do you know about him? I really don't think I can stand office work, unless the screw is very good."

"Aubrey, you must do something; you cannot live on mother. We will get Mr. Swifte to make enquiries about Mr. Hardman, and send him a definite answer to-morrow."

"Very well. Must I come and see him?"

"Yes, of course. Aubrey, do pray rouse yourself to take some interest in your future."

"My future!" was the rejoinder. "I don't think

there is any future to be interested in. Well," he continued, "come with me to see the man. I am not going alone."

Stephanie's lip curled. Aubrey irritated her by his apathy, and the way he leaned on her for every thing.

"No," she said; "surely at twenty you can go and settle your own affairs without my help. I shall not come with you."

Aubrey whistled, shrugged his shoulders, and went downstairs, passing the two men, who had done with the oak chest, and were now engaged with the pictures on the walls of the hall, and some old armour which hung over the wide mantelpiece.

Mr. Hardman was much disappointed that Stephanie did not return with her brother, and he was short and abrupt to the fair-haired, blue-eyed youth, who did not look him in the face, and stood lounging against the mantelpiece in a negligent attitude, as if the matter in hand was of supreme indifference.

"Well, Mr. Bolingbroke," after a few commonplaces had been exchanged, "take my offer or leave it alone; you are not doing *me* a favour, you know. There's plenty of young fellows who would jump at the place; for I get more letters asking for berths than I can answer. I chuck 'em into the waste-paper basket."

"I'll give you an answer to-morrow," Aubrey said. "I must consult my lawyer."

"Oh, that's it, is it! Perhaps you have never heard then of Albert Hardman and Co. Well, some folks are ignorant I know, but I should have thought my name was pretty well known. Make enquiries by all means, and take your precious lawyer's advice. *I* should advise

you, young man, to put your shoulder to the wheel and work; for from what I hear there's precious little left here, and you've got a sister you should work for, and have done with your grand airs. Come, I am a plain-spoken man, and I never mince matters. But with the bailiffs in the house, and the place seized by creditors, you can't afford to be particular; there's my sentiments, and now I'll wish you good-day; you've got my card, but here's my business address—one of 'em, that is to say; for I have three offices in the city, but I put beginners into the Holborn office."

Mr. Hardman, as he spoke, flung down another card on the table, took up his hat, and strode out of the house, nodding to the men as he passed in a familiar way.

A small dog-cart, with a man in livery, was waiting at the door. Mr. Hardman clambered up, took the reins, and whipping the horse furiously, as if to vent his perhaps justifiable indignation against Aubrey, he was soon out of sight.

Mr. Swifte's advice was exactly what Stephanie expected.

Mr. Albert Hardman was known in the commercial world as a man of great wealth. The business of which he was the head was most flourishing, and few mercantile houses stood on a firmer foundation.

Aubrey ought at once to accept the offer of a situation in Mr. Hardman's office, and take up his duties there as quickly as possible.

"Will you see Mr. Hardman?" Stephanie asked, "and tell him that we are glad, grateful, to accept the offer he makes?"

Mr. Swifte accordingly went to see Mr. Hardman with Aubrey the next day, and the agreement was duly signed, and he was enrolled on a staff of clerks at a salary of one hundred pounds a year.

Mr. Hardman's repeated offer of the cottage at twenty pounds a year was declined. It would be too far from London for Aubrey; it would add to the expense by daily railway journeys, and it was necessary—unquestionably necessary—that Aubrey should live with his mother and sister.

"We shall do very well now," Stephanie said. "I have my pen and my brush, and I can earn a little money. The next thing is to find a small house in a London suburb, within easy reach of Aubrey's place of business. I must spend a long day to-morrow, looking for a suitable house. It is so painful to stay here," she said, "so dreadfully painful."

"I know it must be," Mr. Swifte said. "I was going to propose that you and Mrs. Bolingbroke would take us as you find us, and come at once to our house in Bedford Square for a while; it will give you time to look about you. Do not refuse me."

Stephanie's eye filled with tears. She had been accustomed to look on Mr. Swifte in a purely business light, and now he was becoming a true friend.

"You are very kind. Yes; I shall be thankful to get my mother out of the house. It is only pain to remain here. We have no relations, and somehow we have not made many friends—none that would stand by us as you have done, for I know your time is valuable, and you have given so much of it to us."

Mr. Swifte's voice was tremulous as he said: "My

dear young lady, all that I can do for you is a service of deep respect, and, if I may say so, affection. You have behaved so nobly, and I only fear the strain on you may be too great."

"I am young and strong," she said with a smile, "and I have had, thanks to my father, an education which may fit me for literary work. I have written for my own pleasure for several years, and now I shall write for money. Do you think the sale of everything will pay what ought to be paid?"

"King's Acre is a fine estate, and the house and furniture and pictures will realize, I hope, enough to cover the liabilities, and perhaps leave something for you and your brother."

"Let everyone have their due; don't think of us."

"There are some things of Mrs. Bolingbroke's which cannot be claimed. I will see to the separating of them, and then you can make a little home comfortable, I hope. I should advise you to take a small furnished house, and then make it homelike with your own possessions, which I hope to secure for you."

So it was settled; and the next day Mrs. Bolingbroke and Stephanie left King's Acre for ever.

The servants were paid their wages, and stood in the hall unable to control their emotion. Several had volunteered to follow their mistress and serve her for no pay; but Stephanie would not accept such services.

"It is better to face what lies before," she had said, when poor Mrs. Bolingbroke had seemed inclined to take at least her personal attendant at her word.

"It is better to forget the past, and that we ever

were rich and had servants to wait on us. We must wait on ourselves now, or rather I must."

After all, what were all these minor troubles when compared with the one great trouble which overshadowed them—death? Under any circumstances the death of the husband and father is always a great sorrow, changing the colour of life, and leaving a blank nothing can fill. But when, in addition to the loss, there is a dark surrounding of doubts and fears, which hang like a pall over the past, and cloud the future with a sense of shame for one who has been trusted and loved, then, indeed, the bitterness of the cup given to the survivors to drink can only be understood by those who have been called upon to taste it.

A week in Bedford Square made a break, and afforded a rest, for which Stephanie was thankful.

Mrs. Swifte was a kindly, homely person, who did all in her power to show Mrs. Bolingbroke her sympathy. But she was curiously deficient in tact, and her questions were often ill-timed; still Stephanie was always on the watch to shield her mother; and, indeed, Mrs. Bolingbroke was too much crushed to notice what would have wounded her at other times. She moved about like one in a troubled dream, from which she might wake at any moment. Everything that was passing seemed to be shadowy and unreal.

The Swiftes had no children; but they had adopted as a daughter a niece, the only child of Mrs. Swifte's brother.

Stephanie heard continual mention made of Maude, and had to listen to long histories of her perfections from Mrs. Swifte.

"She is away on a visit now, but I hope she will be at home before you leave us, Miss Bolingbroke. You are sure to like her, I think. She is so merry, she cheers up us old folks; and she is always in good humour, and not a bit spoiled, though her uncle does his best to spoil her, I will say."

Stephanie had been a long expedition house hunting on the third day of her arrival in Bedford Square, when, on her return, she saw boxes in the hall, and heard a ringing laugh, which came from the upper regions.

Then there was another voice and another laugh, which she knew to be Aubrey's. He had just returned from Mr. Hardman's office, and was taking off the peculiarities of the head clerk in his department for Maude's benefit. As Stephanie ascended the stairs she heard an exclamation—

"What fun! Dear me, Mr. Bolingbroke, you ought to be on the stage! I am rather good at taking people off myself. Oh——"

Maude stopped suddenly. Stephanie's tall, black figure had turned the corner of the staircase, and came in view of her brother and Maude Lyfton as they stood together on the square landing at the head of the stairs.

They were apparently on very good terms already; and Aubrey said—

"Hallo! Stephanie, this is Miss Lyfton."

"How are you, Miss Bolingbroke?" was Maude's greeting. "I hear you have been house hunting. I'll come with you to-morrow if you like. I think it an awful joke to look over houses."

Stephanie became at once her stiffest and her state-

liest, and saying, "Thanks, I have taken a house to-day, and we shall remove there on Tuesday."

"So soon! I'm sorry for that. Why we shall just be getting friends, and then you will be gone."

"Friends!" thought Stephanie. "As if I could be friends with her."

"Mr. Bolingbroke, you must not let your sister leave us. Which is your room? Oh, on the top floor! We call it the Duke's Room, because some old duke was brought in here a hundred years ago after he had been stabbed in the street. He died there; and they say his ghost comes out of a cupboard sometimes. I sleep next to you; so if you hear his Grace, call me."

All this was said as Miss Lyfton ran upstairs before Stephanie, not noticing that she was not following her. At the top of the second flight she stopped, and looking back, exclaimed—

"Why, she has disappeared! I say, Mr. Bolingbroke, I am afraid of your sister—she looks so grand and grave. She will hate me, I know. Well, I must put up with it. I couldn't mope if I tried."

Even Aubrey's sense of the fitness of things was touched unpleasantly. He said, as he turned towards the door, which Stephanie had closed behind her—

"My sister has had a great deal to bear lately. She is not likely to be in good spirits."

Maude said no more, and Aubrey went to his mother's room, where he guessed rightly he should find Stephanie.

"Well, dear boy," his mother said, "how have you got on at Mr. Hardman's?"

"Oh! all right, thanks, mother. Like the eels, I shall get used to it in time. So you have taken a place, Stephanie?"

"Yes. It is in the house kept by a relation of Mr. Swifte's old servant. I think we are very fortunate. I shall be there all to-morrow getting it ready, and I hope we shall be settled in it soon."

Mrs. Bolingbroke sighed.

"Where is it?" Aubrey asked.

"On the Norwood side of the Herne Hill Road, not two minutes from the station, which will be convenient for you to get into London daily. There is quite a pretty little sitting-room, and everything is very clean."

Mrs. Bolingbroke seemed to take but faint interest in the house, and dreaded the removal.

"When are we to go, Stephanie?" she asked hopelessly. "Mr. and Mrs. Swifte are so kind, they do not wish us to hurry."

"We must not trespass on their kindness, dear mother, and I think the sooner we get into our new life the better."

"Our new life!" Mrs. Bolingbroke repeated—"our new life! Oh, Stephanie, I wish I had died that first day of the shock, as I thought I should."

"As if I could spare you, darling mother. No indeed, you are everything to me now."

"Stephanie," Mrs. Bolingbroke said as Aubrey left the room, "have you heard from Sir Henry Lovelace?"

"No, mother, not a word."

"He will surely write or send."

The colour rushed to Stephanie's pale face.

"He has not written to me, but I have written to him," she said, "to tell him I set him free."

"That you have broken off your engagement? Oh, Stephanie, how could you, when it is all you have to trust to?"

"Dear mother, I have done what I thought right. Say no more, please, now or at any other time."

Then Stephanie bent over her mother, kissed her lovingly, and left her.

Alone in her room—the Duke's Room—with its deep cupboards and dingy furniture, Stephanie threw off her hat and cloak, and sat down in the large easy-chair by the fire.

For though it was now late in March, nothing that could add to the comfort of his guests was omitted by Mr. Swifte. The whole conduct of the house was on a generous scale, and Stephanie thought, as she stretched her weary limbs in the comfortable chair, that the little house on the Herne Hill road would feel very cramped and un-homelike by way of contrast.

Stephanie had youth on her side, and there was rising in her that sense of something like pleasure which comes to the young and strong when difficulties rise in the way.

To overcome is to such natures something to live for—something worth living for; to be brave and to conquer is sweet. After the terrible humiliation and distress of the past few weeks, there was something refreshing in having to grapple with slender means, and to form plans as to the best way of increasing them, and provide comforts for her tenderly-nurtured

mother, who had been all her life nursed in the very lap of luxury.

For some time past Stephanie had written on various subjects of the day, and submitted her papers to her father's criticism.

She had translated the German and Italian books he used for reference, and had entered into all his studies, pursued with a feverish zeal of late, as she now thought to drown the thoughts of his sad embarrassments. Of late, too, there had been flashes of unnatural brilliancy, followed by times of dull stupor, caused by resort to anæsthetics, with which Stephanie had scarcely dared to interfere. Speculation, and gambling in stocks and shares, had never entirely set aside the delight in literary work, and Stephanie had thus benefited, and was a highly-educated, or rather I would say, a highly-cultured woman.

"The *Decade* will perhaps take another of my papers," she thought; "anyhow I will try; and then I may get an order to write a story, or get some translation work. What do surroundings really matter? I shall have my own kingdom in the little red brick house, just as I had it at King's Acre." So Hope plumed her wings, and Stephanie felt confidence in herself and her powers as she sat in the old-fashioned chamber of the London house in Bedford Square, once a fashionable neighbourhood, where the gay folks congregated, now left by the lovers of fashion to quiet sober people like the Swiftes, who found that the large house at a moderate rent suited their purpose, and, caring little for the gay world, were quite content to be beyond its pale.

It was getting late, and Stephanie rose from her chair to light her candles, and prepare for dinner.

As she did so her eye fell on a letter on her dressing-table. She knew the writing at once, and opened it with a hand that trembled.

She had known Sir Henry Lovelace from a boy, and their brotherly and sisterly relations had only within the last few months been changed into others of a deeper and tenderer character.

Sir Henry Lovelace's estate joined King's Acre. He was an orphan, and had been brought up by an old aunt under the care of guardians, very strictly. The only house he had been allowed to enter in his boyhood was King's Acre, and thus it was natural that he should see in Stephanie the ideal of his boyish dream.

He wrote sonnets to his star of beauty before he was fifteen, and she was the confidante of all his youthful romance.

He was a man in whom there was but little fibre, and if Stephanie had expected that he would come to her in her trouble she was disappointed.

As the days passed on, and Sir Henry Lovelace made no sign beyond the formal card of enquiry, Stephanie divined the reason.

She wrote to him telling him that everything was changed, and that she wished him to consider himself free from any engagement to her. Although she had written this, it would not be true to say that she really believed he would accept her decision. She had expected that he would make some show of resistance, and refuse to consent to the separation. Therefore

the pain was great, as she read the letter by the flickering candlelight, and knew that the dream was over. There were a great many tender regrets in the letter, but through all shone the relief that the writer could not conceal, that Stephanie had set him free. "In brighter times let us hope to be re-united, when all these clouds have passed from your sky."

"Brighter times!" she repeated, "brighter times! I thought a friend was born for adversity."

Then she slowly and deliberately tore the letter into strips, set fire to them at the candle, saw them consume to ashes, and leave no sign behind.

"That is one trouble over," Stephanie said, "and now let it go with the dead past. Poor boy! he is relieved of a burden, and I did the right thing. It is not likely that his aunt or his friends would wish him to connect himself with me now, in a neighbourhood too where so much is known and more surmised, where our name is dishonoured, and we are indeed of no reputation."

There was, I think, more bitterness in Stephanie's heart than sorrow at this moment. If the lover of her youth had risen above all considerations except his love for her she would have responded, and been proud that it was for herself Sir Henry Lovelace cared. But the reverse was the case; and something like contempt mingled with disappointment that her proposal should have been accepted with an ill-concealed relief.

Even had he asked for delay, even if he had pleaded with her to re-consider her determination, she would have felt differently; but he had done neither, and she repeated—

“Yes! it is all over. Let the waters of Lethe wash it out for ever; and he must go his way in the world, and leave me to go mine. He talks of an absence from England for a year or two. By that time who can tell what may have happened? A year! We don’t know what a day may bring. It is only a month to-day since we were together in the library, my father and I. I was reading to him till he fell asleep in his chair, all unconscious of the near approach of this terrible sorrow. Ah, father, father, if it had been only *death!* If it had been only loss!” And Stephanie bowed her head and, for the first time since the blow had fallen, wept bitterly.

CHAPTER II.

NO. 6, VICTORIA VILLAS.

STEPHANIE departed on her mission to Herne Hill the next morning early, to make all arrangements for her mother's arrival.

Mr. Swifte had rescued a few possessions from the wreck, and had sent them in a van from King's Acre, which drew up at the door just as Stephanie arrived.

Mrs. Sparkes, who owned the house, was a brisk, alert little woman, anxious to please the ladies, especially as Mr. Swifte took such an interest in them. She looked with surprise at the tall and beautiful young lady, who pinned up her black gown under one of Mrs. Sparkes' large aprons, and set to work in good earnest to unpack the smaller articles.

"They'll fill the house choke full, miss; to be sure if you don't mind I don't; but that wardrobe will never get in at the window, let alone the door; and as to the pictures, I shall have to take down my poor husband's portrait, I suppose, and hang it in my own bedroom. Well, I don't mind, but, deary me, it does make a fuss."

"Yes," Stephanie said, "I am sure it must be rather trying to you, but I will endeavour to make it as easy for you as I can. These things are all we have in the world, and my mother values them, as they belonged to her mother."

"Ah! well, I understand that feeling; that china teapot in the parlour was my mother's, and I wouldn't take its weight in gold for it."

It was a hard day's work, and the field for operations was so narrow. Stephanie thought the house much smaller than she had done on the previous day, and the two square little sitting-rooms, one with a bay-window and one without, were, as Mrs. Sparkes said, "choke full."

Very reluctantly Stephanie had been obliged to give up the wardrobe and a writing-table.

"The walls ain't guttapercha, miss," said one of the men; "you can't squeeze those here articles in nohow."

In the end several of the large goods were returned to the van, which was scarcely more than a covered cart, and Stephanie gave orders that the men should be responsible for them till the next day.

"All right, miss, all right; we'll just put 'em as they stand into one of our sheds, and you may depend on it they'll be as safe as if they was in a church."

The men lingered, and took off their paper caps and wiped their foreheads.

"It has been pretty hard work hauling of the goods back and forth," one of them said; and Stephanie, who had never been accustomed to pay for anything, or to enter into the mysteries of money details, became conscious that the men were waiting for something.

"I will let you know about the things to-morrow. Good afternoon."

"Beg your pardon, miss, but we should be glad of a little trifle for our trouble."

"Oh," said Stephanie, colouring, "I thought Mr. Swifte settled all that!"

"He settles with the master, miss," said the other man; "but that's nought to us."

Stephanie felt for her purse, and saw in it her return ticket to London, and two half-sovereigns.

There seemed nothing, for her inexperience, but to offer one to the men, saying in a half apologetic tone:

"You must divide it, please."

The men's eyes gleamed with surprise and satisfaction. It was not often they received gold as a *douceur*.

"Thank you kindly, miss," said the elder of the two; "we are father and son, so you may be sure we'll share and share alike; and then they took the nosebag from the patient horse, leaped into the cart, and jogged away.

Stephanie was just thinking she felt very hungry and tired, when she was accosted by a plainly-dressed girl about her own age.

"I am a next door neighbour," she said, "and I venture to come in and offer you some refreshment. We dine at one o'clock, and I shall be so pleased if you will join us at tea."

"It's the curate's wife next door, Miss Bolingbroke," Mrs. Sparkes said; "it's young Mrs. Middleton. The young gentleman serves the church up the road."

"I ought to have introduced myself," Mrs. Middleton said with a smile. "Thank you for reminding me, Mrs. Sparkes. Will you come now?" she continued. "Edward will be in directly."

"You are very kind," Stephanie said. "I shall be glad to rest."

"I am sure you must be tired," was the answer. "Removal is always so fatiguing. Edward and I have gone through it twice since we married."

Stephanie looked at the girlish figure before her with surprise, which Mrs. Middleton seemed to understand, for she said, laughing—

"We are quite old married people now we have had three years of married life."

"Really?" Stephanie responded.

"Yes, and such happy years," Mrs. Middleton said. "Sometimes I wonder whether I am not too happy."

They were out of the little garden before Nr. 5, Victoria Villas, and had turned into that before Nr. 6.

"It is not many people who can say as much," Stephanie said, and a sigh escaped her.

"You are tired," her new friend said. "Do make yourself comfortable in Edward's chair till he comes in. Take off your hat, and put your feet on this high stool; that will rest you, and I will go and see about tea."

Then Stephanie was left alone, and took a survey of the little sitting-room, which was a fac-simile in shape of the one she had just left. There were signs of neatness and taste everywhere. The little bay-window was full of flowers. Two canaries were chirping in their cage. There were shelves of books, and a few beautiful photographs, and one lovely engraving of Raphael's celebrated Madonna di San Sisto over the fireplace. Everything was bright and cheerful, and in perfect order. A basket of work was on a little table in the corner, and there were brackets on which stood vases of spring flowers.

"How pretty! how comfortable!" Stephanie thought.

Presently a manly step was heard, and Mrs. Middleton's voice, "Edward!" Then the door opened, and the husband and wife came in together.

"This is Miss Bolingbroke, Edward. She has been hard at work settling in at Mrs. Sparkes', next door, and I have brought her in to tea."

"I am very glad to see you," Mr. Middleton said heartily. "Will you not come to tea at once? I suppose it is ready, Daisy?"

"Quite ready," was the reply; and Stephanie was soon seated at the tea-table, where everything was prettily arranged.

"Who does all this, I wonder?" Stephanie thought; for she had as yet seen no servant. The poached eggs were done to a nicety, and the toast crisp and the butter tempting.

Stephanie thought she had never tasted such tea before; and she did full justice to everything with youthful appetite.

There was an exchange of pleasant talk between the husband and wife, and not altogether, as Stephanie expected, of parish matters.

Stephanie's experience of life in any of its phases had been very limited, and her ideas of the clergy were formed from the rector of King's Barton and his curate, both ordinary men, who took their duties more as drudgery than pleasure, and whose service was scarcely that of the heart.

It is perhaps rash to form judgments like that; but certain it is that many who go on in a groove, year after year, in the same place, do lose the freshness and spirit which are necessary to carry on any work,

whether secular or spiritual, especially when, like the Rector of King's Barton, six children had to be provided for.

Mr. Bolingbroke had never encouraged the visits of the clergy, he had no sympathy with them, and I need not say Stephanie had been brought up in an atmosphere which was singularly devoid of anything like religion. Mrs. Bolingbroke held to the early traditions, and read the psalms and lessons with Stephanie daily, and when she was well enough the carriage was ordered on Sunday mornings, and she would drive to the church at King's Barton with her daughter, where a dull, heartless service was not calculated to kindle any spiritual feeling. Thus Stephanie had grown up in a formal recognition of religious observance, but the spirit had been altogether absent.

The happy little home into which she was so unexpectedly introduced was like a revelation, even on this first afternoon; but it was to have a far deeper influence upon her than she then would have thought possible.

Reality seldom fails to make its mark, and the absolute sincerity of Mr. and Mrs. Middleton was exactly the thing which was most likely to appeal to a nature like Stephanie's.

The rest and refreshment of that first visit, when as a stranger she was so kindly received, were to be followed by much which was to stand her in good stead in the future. When the great blow fell at King's Acre, which shattered the home life there, and out of the ruins rose the spectre of her father's dishonour, Stephanie had nothing but herself to rely upon. She knew of no

other support, and she did not understand what the Refuge in times of trouble meant.

When the man who had professed to love her failed her in the hour of adversity, she braced herself to indifference, and, as she said, flung the whole matter from her angrily and proudly—the waters of Lethe should wash out its very memory, and she would rise above it, by the strength of her own will, by the force of her resolute and determined character.

Patient endurance, and the sweetening of every bitter cup given us to drink by the faithful remembrance of Him who tasted His for our sake, and drained it to the very dregs—tracing His footsteps in the thorny way till the very thorns blossom into flowers, following and finding, and knowing Him to be ours to bless, all this was a mystery as yet to the beautiful girl, who went back to the station, and then by tram to Bedford Square, proud to be able to get through the crowded thoroughfares and noisy streets without losing her presence of mind or self-possession.

Once, when jostled rudely by a man in an omnibus with the remark, "Close up, young woman, if you please," it did strike her how strange was the position for one who had never before travelled in anything but a first-class carriage, and who had always a brougham and a footman in attendance at a station, and had been shielded from all inconvenience or annoyance, whether at home or abroad. There was something in Stephanie's dignified manner which repelled any advance from the man, which he attempted by way of apology.

"You must excuse me, miss," he began. "I am sure I'm proud to ride with such a fine young woman;

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only right is right, and I was obliged to squat down you know."

The look Stephanie gave him was enough. He became sheepish and silent, seeing his flattery was even less acceptable than his rudeness.

Mr. Swifte met her at the entrance of Bedford Square, and gave her his arm.

"I should have come for you," he said, "had I not been detained."

"Have you heard any more about the debts?" she asked. "Will the sale cover them? the proceeds of the sale, I mean."

"I hope so; I cannot tell till the whole thing is completed. Fresh claims come in every day. So many small sums of a hundred or even fifty pounds have been borrowed."

"What for?" Stephanie said. "What did he want money for?"

"I cannot quite tell, but I fancy to pay up the losses on all these companies, and hence Mr. Bolingbroke raised small sums to keep up the appearance of solvency at King's Acre. Then there were several drains on the exchequer, about which it would only pain you to hear, and about which your mother need never know."

Stephanie made no reply at first, then she said:

"If I could do anything I would rather know."

"You can do nothing, my dear young lady. It is better for you to remain in ignorance."

"I trust you as a friend," Stephanie said, "and I don't know how to thank you and Mrs. Swifte for all you have done."

"It has been a service of pleasure. I wish it could be ten times greater," was the reply.

Mr. Swifte had put the latch-key into the door, and they were all in the lobby.

Sounds of a piano reached them, and Mr. Swifte said:

"That is Maude; she keeps the house alive."

"There's a gentleman in the drawing-room, sir," the maid said; then correcting herself, "Two gentlemen, I ought to say. One is waiting to see Miss Bolingbroke."

"Who can it be?" Stephanie asked, with a ring of alarm in her voice; "a creditor, do you think it may be a creditor?"

"No, no; and if it is I shall make short work of it. My office is the place for business, not my private house."

Stephanie went slowly upstairs, and Mr. Swifte opened the drawing-room door for her. To her surprise she saw her brother and Mr. Albert Hardman both seated on a sofa and sipping tea, while Maude was rattling off a waltz of Chopin's, in a style which would have made a true musician shudder.

Mr. Hardman rose at Stephanie's entrance, and advanced towards her with great eagerness, spilling his tea as he did so on his capacious waistcoat, where the gold chain was resplendent.

"I have been waiting an hour to see you," he said. "Patience is rewarded at last! I came back with this youngster, brought him in my brougham, and made the other clerks green with jealousy. Eh, Bolingbroke?—ha, ha! And where have you been all this time, eh?"

The familiar tone and manner received a look almost

as indignant as that which had been bestowed on the man in the omnibus.

"I have been looking at a house, to which we hope to remove in a few days."

"There is no haste, my dear," said kindly Mrs. Swifte. "Don't think of hurrying. We are only too glad to have you, as I have been telling Mr. Hardman."

"Yes; and I say that Mr. Swifte is quite right. What's the hurry? Where is this house, pray?"

"It is at Herne Hill, on the Herne Hill Road," Stephanie said. "It will answer our purpose perfectly." And she said, turning to Mrs. Swifte, "The landlady is all you described—so clean and obliging."

It did not escape Mr. Hardman's notice that Stephanie turned away from him, and devoted her attention to Mrs. Swifte. He felt provoked, and yet not discouraged. Maude was entirely occupied with Aubrey, and Mr. Swifte had been called out of the room, so that Mr. Hardman was left to himself.

Presently Stephanie rose, and saying, "I must go and tell my mother about the house," she was passing Mr. Hardman with a stately bow, when she suddenly remembered that he had given her brother employment, and that he had so far done her a good service. So she paused, and offering her hand, said, as he stood by the door, "I hope my brother is doing all you wish at the office."

"Doing? I daresay he is. I don't look after the clerks; I leave that to my managers and foremen. I mustn't show too much favour, or I shall get the lad into hot water, you know."

"I do not wish any favour to be shown him," Stephanie

said proudly. "I was simply enquiring whether my brother was doing his work as you wished."

All the time Stephanie had been speaking Mr. Hardman's eyes had been fastened on her with the bold and, as she thought, impertinent admiration, which made the colour rush to her face.

Again she bowed with a stately dignity, and passed out of the room.

Stephanie found her mother lying back in a chair with every comfort about her—a pretty tea-set on a table by her side, and her feet resting on a footstool before a bright fire.

"Well, my dear," was Mrs. Bolingbroke's greeting, "so you have come back. Are you tired, Stephanie?" For Stephanie was still silent. She stood irresolute for a few moments, and then throwing herself on her knees by her mother's chair, she laid her head upon her shoulder and burst into a flood of tears.

"Oh, my dear, my dear child, don't distress me! Stephanie, is the house such a dreadful place? Is it quite impossible that we can get into it? Stephanie, my dear, don't add to my troubles."

Still Stephanie sobbed and said nothing, her mother repeating—

"Don't add to my troubles. They are heavy enough. Don't add to them."

Poor Stephanie! This appeal at last brought her to herself.

Mrs. Bolingbroke was one of those women who, half unconsciously, make their own comfort or their own sorrow the centre round which everything moves. Between her and her husband there had never been

any real sympathy. He never confided in her, nor did she ever invite his confidence. She led an easy, luxurious life, a half-secluded life, which demanded consideration from everyone, and obtained it. The condition of Mr. Bolingbroke's affairs, and the great storm of ruin which swept over his family at his death, was certainly a great surprise to everyone, and to no one was it a greater surprise than to his wife! She knew nothing of his real life; she believed him to be extraordinary as a scholar, and would sometimes look at his library, where he spent most of his time, and feel a faint pride in the possession of a man, who was so lifted above the common herd by superior attainments and gifts!

Mrs. Bolingbroke never asked a question as to telegrams, which of late had attracted the attention of the household by their frequency; nor did she ask what had taken her husband so often to London in the past two or three years.

On his return he generally brought a new book, or water-colour drawing, for Stephanie, or some pretty trifle for her; but no questions were asked, perhaps because to expect a reply was hopeless.

Mrs. Bolingbroke had been roused to something like action when, a year before this time, Aubrey had not returned to Eton, and she had entreated her husband to tell her the real reason. As we know, there were several very cogent reasons. Aubrey's bills had not been paid, and his conduct had not been such that any forbearance could be extended, either to him or his father. But Mrs. Bolingbroke had settled it in her own mind, that Aubrey had been the victim of spite, and

that he was much to be pitied for the treatment he had received at the hands of the Headmaster. Aubrey had a soft, caressing manner towards his mother, and he was really her idol. She was, in truth, a little in awe of her daughter. Stephanie was so far above her in intellectual *calibre*, with an energetic, self-reliant nature so utterly opposed to her own, that she could not understand her. Mrs. Bolingbroke would have sacrificed anything for the sake of a quiet and easy life, while Stephanie would make no sacrifice, except that which duty showed plainly before her, to attain any end.

Brave and resolute, she had a strength of character so far removed from her mother's gentle, placid, and easy-going, loving nature, that it was natural a gulf should be set between the mother and daughter, which was only bridged over by the clinging tendency of the one, and the protecting affection of the other.

After a few minutes Stephanie's sobs ceased, and she raised her head from her mother's shoulder.

"I am not often so foolish," she said. "Dear mother, don't be vexed; I am only tired. It is—it is new to me to go about London alone you know, and people are apt to be impertinent in omnibuses."

"Omnibuses! Oh, Stephanie, you have surely not been in an omnibus! A cab is bad enough!"

"An omnibus is good enough, mother," Stephanie replied; "they do jolt rather, and get very crowded; but now let me tell you about the home. It is quite a dear little place, and we shall have kind neighbours. We must make your room as pretty as we can, and the sun shines right into the front rooms. A south aspect,

you know, and that is just what is most important for you. After all, I would far rather live in Victoria Villas than here, with the windows all shut in with curtains," she said, glancing towards the large window of the bedroom, over which were curtains that should have been cream colour, but were deep coffee colour with London smoke, falling in straight lines, and not tied back.

If they had been tied back there would have been nothing to be seen but a black wing of the next house, and a sad and stunted tree, where city sparrows were chirping gaily to welcome the green buds, which were making a valiant effort to adorn the blackened branches with emerald beauty.

There was the atmosphere, too, about the house which is so suggestive of London. Rooms where windows are rarely opened, and through which the pure breath of heaven seldom passes.

"I think we shall get on very well in Victoria Villa, mother, and to-morrow I am going to see the editor of the *Decade*, and take him one of those papers that my father praised so highly—too highly I dare say; but still I have some confidence in my powers to make a little addition to our income, and get you comforts and pretty things."

"You are very good, my dear; wonderfully clever, just like——" Mrs. Bolingbroke faltered, and Stephanie rising said, "Now I must get you ready for dinner. You will come down to dinner this evening, mother; I think it will please Mrs. Swifte, and she is so kind and considerate."

"I don't like the niece," Mrs. Bolingbroke said fretfully. "Isn't she very vulgar?"

"Perhaps she is; but I think we can put up with her for a day or two, can't we?"

"She is so free in her manner to Aubrey. When I came into the drawing-room last evening I was quite shocked to hear her loud laugh, and wasn't she calling him by his Christian name!"

"Was she? I did not hear her; and we must remember Aubrey is scarcely more than a boy."

When Mrs. Bolingbroke went into the drawing-room in her long black dress and widow's cap, with the white tulle floating over her shoulders, she looked, as Mrs. Swifte said, like a person of distinction. And if this could be said of the mother, it might with greater truth be said of the daughter.

"Do you know," Maude said to Aubrey as she was turning over the songs, and he was choosing which she should sing, "Do you know I am awfully afraid of your sister? She looks like—let me see, who do I mean?—I can't think of her name—the lady Olivia in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* perhaps. And I'll tell you who is in love with her, like Malvolio, don't you see—didn't you see to-day?"

Aubrey a little resented this free and easy discussion of his sister, and said indifferently, "Oh, I dare say several people have been in love with her. But now, then, what will you sing?"

Maude twitched the music from his hand petulantly. She had a dim idea she had gone too far.

"Well," she said, "I am no admirer of that stiff and starched sort of beauty, I confess; but Mr. Hardman,

that vulgar man with the big gold chain, is over head and ears in love with her; see if I am not right. Now then we will proceed to sing this duet. Come, you must try," and Maude rattled off the prelude of a well-known and hackneyed song, "My heart and I."

CHAPTER III.

THE CLOUDS RETURN AFTER THE RAIN.

STRANGE things soon become familiar; and before the spring had come round again Stephanie had almost forgotten that her early years had been passed in the spacious mansion of King's Acre, so completely had the little house in the Herne Hill Road become home.

Full of hope, and, as I said, delighting in overcoming difficulties, with strong health and fine natural gifts, Stephanie might be said to be happier in the present, than she had been in the past.

Mrs. Bolingbroke had all she needed—quiet and rest, pretty surroundings of flowers, a few light books to read, a little knitting and a little needlework, and the visits of one or two neighbours to whom she had, to Stephanie's surprise, taken a fancy. Mrs. Bolingbroke's horizon, whether at King's Acre or in the Herne Hill Road, was a limited one. She was a person who subsided easily into any new condition of life; and moreover there was always the latent hope that her beautiful and accomplished daughter would one day be reinstated in her right position, and that she might gain it with no trouble to herself and with no effort.

There is no doubt that people of ease-loving natures like Mrs. Bolingbroke, whose personal comfort is the one great aim, are by no means disagreeable to live with, if only their comfort is well provided for. Even the loss of the carriage and the drive on fine days was scarcely as much regretted as Stephanie had expected.

A comfortable chair by the fire in winter, and a sunny corner in the little bay-window in summer, with the scent of flowers about her, and all her little whims and wishes indulged and supplied by her daughter's loving care, and Mrs. Bolingbroke made no complaint.

Even her grief, which had been very sincere, for her husband had become a gentle sadness; and she was troubled with no fear, as Stephanie often was, whether there were any sufferers from Mr. Bolingbroke's misdeeds.

But towards the end of that first year of sorrow and change, a cloud had risen to which Stephanie at least was not insensible. It was connected with Aubrey. And one dark, dull March day, after the early dinner, when Stephanie was leaving the little garden with a roll of manuscript in her hand, she was startled to see Mr. Hardman at the gate.

It was not his first visit, nor his second; he had come again and again to propose to Stephanie that she should exchange the struggle of small means for the contemplated wealth which as his wife she should command.

The decided refusal which had been given again and again did not seem to have any effect, except to make him more determined to gain his point.

"Oh," he said abruptly, as he stood face to face with Stephanie, "can I speak to you in private?"

Stephanie dreaded these private interviews inexpressibly, but she controlled herself, and said calmly, "Yes, will you come in?"

She opened the door of the little parlour, where she got through so much of her work, often when her mother was quietly sleeping, and Aubrey was at the Swiftes, as he said, dining and sleeping there instead of coming home.

Mr. Hardman's large figure looked almost unnaturally large in that little room, and Stephanie quailed beneath his gaze.

"I'm come about that young scamp, your brother," he said. "He is doing no good. The head clerk came to me this morning with a complaint. He muddles his accounts, he is idle, and gives himself airs, and I tell you he is up to no good. What time does he come in at night, eh?"

"My brother is often at the Swiftes, in Bedford Square, they are very kind and hospitable."

"Humph! Now look here, if he were any one but your brother I'd turn him off to-morrow. I'd send him packing, and call upon him to make that ledger right. But you see he *is* your brother, and so I'll keep him on. Do you hear? I keep him on because I love you. I worship you, and I am determined to win you. Why," he said, changing his tone, which had been defiant, to one which was insinuating, "Why, you are my queen of beauty! you are the noblest woman I ever saw! I'll make you sparkle with such diamonds that duchesses will envy! You shall go to court, and take the world by storm! Yes, you, as Albert Hardman's wife."

"Never!" Stephanie said. "Why do you continue to

persecute me? If you have any regard for me, never allude to this subject again. I—I thank you for being forbearing with Aubrey. I will talk to him. I will get my friend Mr. Middleton to talk to him.”

“Your friend! Who is he pray? Some upstart parson, eh?”

“He is my friend,” Stephanie said; “let that be enough.”

“Look here,” Mr. Hardman said, “I’ve a good mind to do as Barker, my clerk, advises—send your young gentleman about his business, and give him no character. But I’ll give him one more trial; and for this what will you give me, eh? What will you give me?”

“It is cruel to press me thus,” Stephanie exclaimed; “no true gentleman would do it.”

“Gentleman!” he repeated, stung by her words. “I am an honest man, and that’s more than can be said of some who have lived on other folk’s money in fine places for years.”

“I cannot hear any more, Mr. Hardman,” Stephanie said. “I will talk seriously to my brother. I will do my utmost to induce him to begin again. Try him till June, and then if—if it is hopeless, I must—I must think of something else.”

“Think of me; come to me. I will wait till June, but no longer. Give me your hand. What, won’t you even let me touch your hand?”

Poor Stephanie let him take her long slender fingers into his large, coarse, be-ringed hand. He looked down at them, and muttered something she could not hear, pressed his lips on them, and was gone; shutting the

door with a violent bang, which made Mrs. Bolingbroke start and ring her little hand-bell.

For a moment Stephanie stood to collect her energies, and not show her mother the disgust and distress which she felt; then she crossed the passage, and opened the door of the little drawing-room.

"Who was that banging the door? It quite frightened me, Stephanie."

"It was Mr. Hardman, mother."

"Mr. Hardman! What did he come for?"

"To complain of Aubrey," Stephanie said. "He is very careless and idle, and Mr. Hardman says he cannot keep him unless he improves."

Mrs. Bolingbroke's face underwent an instant change.

"It is hardly likely poor Aubrey could settle down in an office with common clerks."

"Mother, we cannot keep him in idleness; it would be wrong to do so. He must work at something."

"We are so friendless," Mrs. Bolingbroke murmured. "We have no relations to turn to. I think Mr. Swifte might be asked to take Aubrey; a lawyer's office is better than a merchant's—a merchant's like Mr. Hardman."

"Well, he will try him till June. I got him to promise so much, so we must try to persuade Aubrey to do better; for your sake surely he will try. I am just going to post this manuscript, and then I shall go in to the Middletons, for she is not very well to-day. I shall be back in time to make your tea. Don't fret about Aubrey, dear mother;" and then Stephanie was gone.

She walked quickly to the post-office, and went on the Dulwich Road. That was a favourite walk of hers. She loved the old-world gallery, hidden among trees,

and the quaint school and church, where the name of the founder, Alleyn, is yet the honoured name in Dulwich.

Stephanie had a very swift, firm tread, and yet her carriage was easy and dignified. A quick walk, to those who have young lungs and can breathe freely, even when at full speed, is always a wonderful safety-valve to let off superfluous energy and any latent vexation. Stephanie let the cold March east wind blow on her face, and while others were shrinking and bowing beneath it, she met it fearlessly and with a strange sense of absolute enjoyment. An east wind had the same invigorating effect on one who has left on record that he did not endorse in his own experience the old adage that

“When the wind is in the east
It’s neither good for man nor beast.”

And perhaps there was something in Stephanie’s nature which was akin to Charles Kingsley, who never sat down contentedly under wrong as irremediable, but braced himself to find some means of redress. The true knightly spirit, the spirit of chivalry, which is not yet dead amongst us, but is still burning in the hearts of many a true man and woman, on whose pathway the light of that great and noble champion for good yet shines as a beacon-pathway—the way heavenward.

I have said, that when the blow fell upon Stephanie, she had never grasped anything like the true meaning of faith. With her, as with many others, religion was a thing apart from her daily life—something above it and out of reach, and only possessed, if possessed at all, by the force of education and habit. Stephanie had never felt that faith was life, never grasped the full meaning of life when the light of God’s truth shines on

it, showing that all work, if done in that light, must be work for Him, and not for self.

It was too late to go into the gallery this afternoon; and Stephanie was turning to retrace her steps, when a cheery greeting stopped her.

"Wait a moment, Miss Bolingbroke, or I shall be unable to overtake you."

Stephanie laughed.

"It is too cold to linger," she said; "but it is delicious when you can walk fast."

"I don't know that I think an east wind delicious," he said; "but it agrees with you evidently. I wish my little Daisy could meet it as bravely as you do."

"Is she not so well to-day? I intended to come and see her on my return."

Mr. Middleton sighed.

"I cannot say she is not so well as yesterday, or last week even. Her condition seems stationary."

"What does Dr. White say?"

"That she ought to be sent to the Riviera, or some other impossible place, to escape your friend the east wind. It is a simple impossibility," Mr. Middleton went on.

"Is it because of expense?" Stephanie asked.

"Yes, I could not find the money; and if I could, she would not leave me."

"Ah, how one longs to be rich to help," Stephanie said, "people who need help, instead of being poor and perhaps wanting help oneself! You don't know," she went on, "how strange it has been to me suddenly, quite suddenly, to have to think about money and how much things cost, and to try to meet expenses—I who

never gave a thought how things came to me. They came, and there was an end of it. There is a pleasant side to it when I get a cheque from the *Decade* for twice as much as I expected, as I did last week; and I hope the manuscript I posted as I came out, will bring me another."

"There are always two sides to a question," Mr. Middleton said; "and wise people like you try to look at the brightest side."

"I have had a dark side forced on me to-day. I can't tell you about it; but I will tell Mrs. Middleton, which comes to the same thing in the end," she said, laughing.

Then she went on more seriously, "I feel sometimes that this sort of fight I have to make, drags me down, and it becomes anything but noble to be always thinking of how to make two ends meet. Your work is so widely different. Think of your class of men, how much you can do for them, and how you can influence them. This brings me to the dark side of my picture. I do wish you could really get hold of my brother Aubrey."

"I wish I could, but I can't force myself on him."

"You are young, and full of spirit and energy, and he might take a word from you which offends him from other people. He has had every disadvantage, poor boy. Eton life and home life, both likely to make all his weak points weaker, instead of strengthening them."

"He is getting a salary, I suppose?" Mr. Middleton asked.

"Yes; but it does no good. I scarcely like to tell

you, but I have had to pay several bills for him already."

"You ought not to do it; it is distinctly wrong. Make a bold stand at once, and decline to help him."

"But then there is mother. I have to spare her. And if he gets into serious trouble, who would help him out of it?"

"Well, I will devise some plan to get hold of him if I can, and then I will tell you what I make out of him."

They had reached Victoria Villas now, and Mr. Middleton opened the door of his house with a latch-key, and letting Stephanie in, went to a neighbour's house to see a parishioner who was ill.

Mrs. Middleton was lying on a sofa wrapt in shawls, and looking very fragile and delicate.

"I am so glad to see you," she said, as Stephanie bent down to kiss her; "but I must not keep you long, for I think your mother has visitors."

"Visitors! Who can they be?"

"Your brother and a lady I think. You see I lie here all day, and I am afraid I am turning into a gossip; for I am rather amused to see those who come in and go out."

"Then you saw that dreadful man, Mr. Hardman, to-day?"

"Yes, and heard him too. He banged the door and the gate with terrific force."

"Oh, he is dreadful!" Stephanie said. "Coming to complain about Aubrey, and—you may guess the rest."

Stephanie had knelt down by Mrs. Middleton's side, and hid her face on the cushion of the sofa.

"Yes, I can guess from what you have told me, poor child!"

There was only the difference of twenty-four and twenty-eight in their ages, but Mrs. Middleton had from the beginning of their friendship, gentle and unpretending as she was, taken the part of elder sisterly care for the tall and sometimes stately girl, whose position in life had filled her with thankfulness for her own.

Mrs. Middleton was one of those sympathetic people who are the most helpful friends. From that day when, now nearly a year ago, Stephanie had been brought into the comforting atmosphere of that little house, she had found Mrs. Middleton always ready with spoken or unspoken sympathy. And now, when these few happy years of married life, seemed likely to be clouded by the want of that priceless blessing of health, Stephanie was to learn a lesson of patience and faith.

Far, far deeper was the impression produced upon Stephanie by the living witness that faith in God's love was no mere shadowy notion, but a great and beautiful reality; and no books or sermons could have made upon her this impression.

The sudden failure of health and strength had come over the happy life of the young wife like a cloud on a fair landscape. Stephanie saw no struggle and no resistance to God's will. It was accepted; nay, it was made hers.

"Troubles are so varied," Mrs. Middleton said, "I think they are chosen for us to suit our peculiar tempers and needs. A year ago, when I was able to go everywhere with Edward, and be active and busy all day long, I think I was too busy, and, perhaps—yes, I

am sure—too proud of being able to keep his home so well, that all my little contrivances were never guessed. So now I am to be taught that Edward, and the mothers' meetings, and the parish can do as well without me."

"They don't do as well," Stephanie exclaimed vehemently, "it is impossible."

"Well, we will not contest the point, dear. I only wanted to show you that I feel what I hope you will feel—that nothing happens to us by chance, but is for our good."

"I can't quite feel that," Stephanie said, "for myself. For you it is different. But my trouble came from the misdoings of other people, which is hard to bear. I do bear it, and I will bear it, only it is dreadful to have the bait of wealth held before me, and to think that if only it was under different circumstances how much good I could do. Send you to the Riviera, make you well, help all Mr. Middleton's good works, replace my mother in her own proper position in life. If only it were not quite impossible! But why talk about it? I have asked Mr. Middleton to try and influence Aubrey. If he does not improve he is to be sent away from Mr. Hardman's office, and then—what? Idleness, and all the evils it will bring."

"Let us hope it will not come to that, dear. I will talk to Edward about it all. If anyone can get hold of a young man, he is the right person to do it."

Stephanie had left her position by the sofa, and was doing what she called a little tidying to the room, and before she left Mrs. Middleton she had brought her her tea, replenished the fire, and made her say:

“Thanks for all your loving service. I do not know what I should do without you.”

Such words filled Stephanie’s heart with gladness. Everything that she did was taken as a matter of course in her own home. Very seldom did even her mother let fall a word of recognition, and those who have done their utmost for others will understand how the sweetness of service is often marred by the want of this recognition, when even a smile or a kind word of appreciation would be enough to send us on our way rejoicing.

“It is I who have to thank you,” Stephanie said. “You have done so much for me; and I can never forget it.”

It was indeed like going into another world when Stephanie entered her own little drawing-room.

Her mother’s face was flushed, and she looked excited as she said pitifully:

“Where have you been, Stephanie?”

“We found mother alone and moping,” Aubrey said with a laugh, “and we have cheered her up.”

The “we” struck unpleasantly on Stephanie’s ear.

What right had that smart, loud-voiced young woman to be spoken of thus? for the “we” must of necessity refer to her?

“Yes,” she said, laughing; “I never let any one be dull; it is contrary to my principles. The world is a pleasant place enough, if we go through it in a jolly way. I say,” she went on, “you have not been to Bedford Square for ages. Come back to dinner to-night; you are always welcome. Uncle Swifte is cracked about

you, and aunt almost as bad; only she does think you a little proud and lofty."

Stephanie was inwardly chafing under this attack, but she had, as we know, great self-control, and she said coolly:

"Have you been at the office to-day, Aubrey?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I have."

"You must have left it early."

"I don't ask your leave as to when I leave the beastly hole, and so you need not concern yourself about it. I wanted to see my mother very particularly, because I had something to tell her."

Maude now began to simper, and play with her bangles, looking down at them, and avoiding Stephanie's eyes. There was something in them that made her feel uneasy.

"Well," Aubrey said, "to cut a long story short, Maude has been so kind as to accept me, and we are engaged."

"Yes, Stephanie," Mrs. Bolingbroke said in a distressed voice; "but Aubrey is so young, and I think Mr. Swifte ought to have told me, and warned me."

"He couldn't do that," Maude said, "for he doesn't know that we have an understanding. You shouldn't say an engagement, you naughty boy."

"Well, anyhow, I can trust you," Aubrey said, taking one of Maude's hands in his. "What do you want to look so grave for, Stephanie? You ought to be glad. I can tell you it is a precious good thing for me to have a settled future—something which can even make me endure the office. It's a settled thing, and

I am only ashamed of my sister that she can behave so unkindly to one I love."

"There are so many things to consider, Aubrey. You are not twenty-one; you have no means of support; you are not trying to make the best of your position in Mr. Hardman's office. It is better that you should know, and that Miss Lyfton should know, that Mr. Hardman has to-day complained of your inattention and"—Stephanie added with emphasis—"carelessness in your work."

Aubrey's fair, handsome face flushed with anger.

"Mother," he said, "how can you allow her to treat me like this? It is intolerable; it is shameful."

"Oh, pray, for goodness sake, don't quarrel about me, you silly boy! I don't care. And if all the Mr. Hardmans in the world said horrid things of you, it would not change me. I am not so fickle."

"You are all that is dear and noble," Aubrey said, "and I'll prove worthy of you yet. We had better be going now. Mrs. Swifte told me to ask you to come back to dine, Stephanie, but I am sure I don't want you now. Come, Maude, bid my mother good-bye; *she* is not so hard as my sister."

"I am *just*, Aubrey, not hard," Stephanie said, her voice trembling. "I will consult Mr. Swifte about this to-morrow, and I feel almost sure he will agree with me that a boy of your age has no right to engage himself, without a reasonable means of support, to any woman."

"We don't want your interference, I hope," said Maude; "but I really don't wish to hear any more. Do

come," she said, putting her hand in Aubrey's arm as she carried him off.

"Oh, Stephanie, what a vulgar young person! How can my dear boy be so blinded? And she is much older than he is. Dear, dear! I hope the Swiftes have not laid a trap for him; and that perhaps their kindness to us last year had this scheme at the bottom."

"Mother, how can you imagine anything so unlikely? As if Aubrey was so desirable."

"He is very, very handsome," Mrs. Bolingbroke said in a pleading voice; "and you know there is hardly an older family in England than your father's, whilst mine is nothing to be ashamed of. I had a grandfather a judge, and his cousin was a bishop."

Stephanie let her mother wander on in the maze of her family greatness, whether of the Bench or the Bar, and could almost envy the soft, pliant groundwork of a character which by its very nature could receive no very deep impressions.

"I shall see Mr. Swifte to-morrow," she said, "and then we will decide what steps we ought to take."

Stephanie found Mr. Swifte in the private room of his office in Lincoln's Inn Fields—a dingy, dull room, which was pervaded by the musty smell of old books and parchments.

Mr. Swifte was never too busy to be kind to Stephanie. He had known all the history of her girlhood, and the blight which had fallen on her early womanhood; and he heartily admired the daughter who could so bravely try to forget, yes, and to forgive, her father's fall, and devote herself to her mother with such whole-hearted devotion.

It was as Stephanie knew it would be. Mr. Swifte had not any notion that there was anything between his niece and her brother beyond a little flirtation, and he had hardly thought even of that.

"Has Mrs. Swifte any suspicion? I think not. I cannot be sure. But I can assure you Maude will not be encouraged to persist in this matter, which is so manifestly improper. Maude is a very bright creature, full of talent; but of course I know that she is not at all on a level with a young man of family like yours."

"I think," said Stephanie, in a tone which was that of sorrowful humiliation, "I think it scarcely befits us to speak much of our family distinction *now*; we have fallen low enough. It is not *that* to which I refer; it is the feeling that my brother had no right to enter into any engagement in his present circumstances. He is not doing at all well in Mr. Hardman's office."

"I feared it might be so," Mr. Swifte said. "He is welcome, thoroughly welcome, to a dinner and a bed at my house; but theatres are over late. I hear that he keeps late hours; and I have heard that, to take a low ground, his habits were not likely to conduce to his health. But, my dear young lady," Mr. Swifte said, really grieved at the distress which was so plainly written on Stephanie's face, "we must not give up all hope; all may yet be well. I will speak to my wife, and Maude shall be sent away on a visit. There are some friends in Scotland who are always ready to receive her. That is a safe distance, and I shall at the same time speak very seriously to my niece. So do not lose heart, but be hopeful."

"I have been too hopeful," Stephanie said. "When

we first settled down in our little home, and I had my work and acquaintances, who have proved dear friends, always at hand, I was full of hope. It is not," she said passionately, "that I shrink from work, or that I care about the loss of money and position. Oh, that is nothing, if only I could hope that in the end there would be a reward—Aubrey doing well, and bringing back the lost honour to our name, and my poor mother happy. But what if my brother plunges us more deeply into disgrace? What if——"

"You must not forestall trouble, my dear Miss Bolingbroke. Young men so often—so very often—turn over a new leaf, as the saying is, and I have great hopes it may be so in your brother's case."

Stephanie was silent for a minute. "I must not keep you any longer from more important matters. I leave you to speak to Miss Lyfton, for I feel I shall do no good by interference."

"Very good. Now shall I call a cab for you?"

"No, thanks. I have learned to walk about London, and have long found out my feet were of more service to me than cabs or omnibuses."

Mr. Swifte sat with the ribbon of his gold eye-glasses balanced on his finger for some minutes, giving it a gentle motion to and fro. Presently he rubbed back his scanty hair from his forehead, saying, "I think I see! The young fellow fancies I shall make Maude a yearly allowance, and leave her all I possess. He shall not burrow underground to effect this; he shall find I will aid and abet nothing that noble-hearted sister of his disapproves. Dear, dear, what a change it is for her to be winding her way through the crowded

streets alone and unprotected; she who never set foot in London in her life before, and who was born, if any one ever was, in 'the purple,' as they say. Who could have thought that a man like her father could throw away his good name as he did, and leave behind all this tangle of debts and embarrassments, which we are not half through even yet? It is dreadful to me how some of the folks he has deceived thirst for vengeance, and lament that death has robbed them of revenge."

Mr. Swifte was as good as his word. He made very short work of the matter with Maude. His wife, who in her secret heart leaned towards the handsome boy, who knew well how to gain her favour by well-timed flattery of herself and of Maude, was told she must prepare her for a visit of two months to her friends near Edinburgh, and that without delay.

"She will be a great loss in the house, Charles," Mrs. Swifte said in a fretful voice.

"Loss! you have lost her before, and I tell you plainly, I will stop this nonsense with young Bolingbroke. Engaged to him! Rubbish! What are they to live on? And she is half a dozen years older than he is. No, no, it is all nonsense. Young Bolingbroke has his own way to make, and from what I hear he is just now more likely to mar than make it. I shall speak to him, and Maude also."

Aubrey showed much more real concern than Maude did. She took the whole matter lightly, and did not at all object to another visit to Edinburgh. But Aubrey's heart was sore, and his pride hurt. "What right," he asked, "had his sister to interfere with his affairs? he should please himself, and not consult her."

"Well, well," Mr. Swifte said, "you must make a position for yourself, and satisfy *me*, before I consent to any engagement."

"Satisfy *you*!" The tone was contemptuous, which Mr. Swifte was not slow to notice.

"Yes," he repeated; "satisfy me as to your conduct in Mr. Hardman's office and out of it, and I desire to point out, that you must observe regular hours when you find it convenient to make use of my house."

"I shall not trouble you in future," Aubrey said proudly; "not after——"

"My niece has left us," Mr. Swifte supplied the rest of the sentence. "Now look here," he continued kindly, "I have been the legal adviser of your family for years, and your sister has, I may say, honoured me with her friendship since the heavy troubles which have fallen on her, and which she has met so bravely."

"They have fallen on me too," Aubrey said. "Instead of the heir of a fine estate, I find myself the heir of penury. You are always talking of Stephanie's loss, as if she alone suffered."

"It would be difficult to sympathize too deeply with Miss Bolingbroke, or to value her conduct too highly. Let me beg you to give her and your mother as little anxiety as you can, and if you go on well for say a year, we will talk over matters again."

"I shall be of age in September," Aubrey said, "and may then please myself; but," he added with a touch of real feeling, "I am sure you mean kindly, Mr. Swifte, and I am much obliged to you for your advice. I'll try to follow it, but you will understand I do not mean

to give up Miss Lyfton till"—with a proud smile—"till she gives up me."

"He is only a boy," Mr. Swifte thought, when he was going over the interview in his own mind, and deciding what he should report to Stephanie as being the result. "He is only a boy. If he had only something of his sister in him, adversity might make a man of him; but he is like his father I fear, and has all his mother's yielding nature. Well, we shall see. Maude may change her mind, and it won't be for the first time if she does!"

So Maude went off to Edinburgh, and Aubrey seemed to be really inclined to turn over that new leaf of which Mr. Swifte had spoken.

He spent the greater part of his evenings at home, and did not repulse Mr. Middleton's overtures of friendship. So for the time Stephanie took courage, and anxiety about her brother was again held in abeyance. June was the time Mr. Hardman had mentioned as the utmost limit of his forbearance and patience, and to all appearances it now seemed likely that there would be no complaint urged against Aubrey by the head clerk, and that his salary would be raised, and then if Maude Lyfton still determined to marry him, he must do so; and probably he would do so without further delay.

CHAPTER IV.

JUNE.

JUNE had come—a really old-fashioned June, full of roses, and strawberries, and all delights.

The little houses in the Herne Hill Road were hot and airless, and Stephanie was, after a long day's work, panting for a breath of country air and freedom from dusty roads.

Her mother was sitting fanning herself in the bay-window, a book with its face turned down upon her lap, and a general air of *dolce far niente* about her.

Presently she roused herself to say:

“Ah! here comes Aubrey; he is very good in being punctual now. Even you cannot find fault with him, Stephanie.”

“Aubrey is much improved, I hope,” was the reply.

“You hope! He is very much changed; he is so tender and kind to me.”

Stephanie was silent. Perhaps it was a little provoking to hear praises bestowed on her brother, and to hunger herself sometimes for a word of appreciation.

“You have not heard anything more about that girl, Stephanie? I hope Aubrey has given up that folly, and that is why he is so sweet and good now.”

“He has not given up Maude Lyfton; he hears from her and writes to her as formerly.”

"Does he? Well, I only hope she will stay in Scotland; there is safety in distance."

Again Stephanie made no reply.

"Would you like to come out for a little, mother? I will go and find Aubrey, and he will go and order the little pony carriage."

"No; I don't think I care about it. You can go with Aubrey."

Stephanie heard Aubrey's tread overhead, and wondered that he did not come in as usual to bring his mother a daily paper, or a story from Smith's bookstall.

She left the room and went into the little passage.

Aubrey's hat was thrown down, and as she picked it up to hang it on the peg, she saw an open letter lying by it. If she had wished, it was impossible to avoid seeing what was written on the first sheet.

"Unless the sum of fifty pounds is paid by twelve o'clock to-morrow, we shall institute proceedings without further delay."

All concealment was utterly foreign to Stephanie's nature. She took the letter in her hand, and went up to Aubrey's room. She knocked at the door, saying, "May I come in?"

"All right," he said, indifferently. "Has it not been awfully hot to-day? Is mother going to take a drive with me in one of those delightful carriages?"

It did not escape Stephanie's notice that Aubrey did not turn to look at her, but kept his face out of the open window against which he was kneeling, with his arms folded on the sill.

"Aubrey," Stephanie said, "I found this letter by your hat just now. What does it mean?"

He turned round angrily.

"What does it mean? Give it to me; it's no concern of yours."

"Yes it is. You have been buying what you have no means to pay for."

"That's nothing to you."

"This is a jeweller's bill," she said. "I know the name in Bond Street. You can't pay it. Oh, Aubrey!"

"Now then, don't jump to conclusions. I *have* paid that bill."

"*Is that true, Aubrey?*"

"Yes; on my honour."

But he turned away his face again, and she saw he was anxious to avoid her earnest gaze.

"Well," she said, "if it *is* paid you have escaped disgrace."

"Disgrace! How many people do you suppose are sued for money? Thousands of them in the very highest ranks. It's thought nothing of; it's the way of half the swells in London."

"I refuse to believe it," Stephanie said; "and if it is as you say, it is shameful!"

"My dear," Aubrey said, "you know nothing of the world. I could tell you of a lady, whose name you know if you don't know her, who is an earl's daughter, and lives at one place in style till the creditors drive her away, and then goes off and tries it on somewhere else."

He was evidently talking against time, and to prevent any further discussion of his own affairs.

Stephanie paused a moment. Then she said:

"Where did you get the money to pay that jeweller's bill?"

"Get it? Why I have a salary, haven't I? and my mother's noble allowance."

"Which we can ill spare," Stephanie said. "No, Aubrey, there must be something wrong. You had better tell me."

"My dear Stephanie, I am not an infant even in the eyes of the law. I came of age last week. A nice coming of age it was for me. I who ought to be at King's Acre, and ——"

"It is no use going over the past, Aubrey; the present is yours, and it is your bounden duty to make the most of your advantages. Oh, Aubrey, do pray give up all underhand and dishonest ways!"

He winced visibly as she spoke, then he rose quickly from his position by the window, and saying: "I will go and find out whether mother would like a drive," he was out of the room and down the little staircase with two bounds before another word could be said.

Aubrey and his mother went for their drive, and Stephanie was left alone. "Yes," she said, "the ides of June are come, but they are not gone. Something is wrong, very wrong I am afraid, but I am helpless."

"I will not stay at home and 'mope,' as Maude Lyfton expresses it; I will go out and try to find Mr. Middleton."

He was going into his own gate as she passed out of hers.

"Ah!" he said, "I wanted to see you. I have had a good account of Daisy to-day; she is decidedly better; but I am afraid you will not like the other part of my news so well. I have had a curacy offered me

at Torquay, and for my wife's sake I shall feel it my duty to accept it."

Stephanie's face expressed something deeper than ordinary surprise and sorrow.

"Oh," she said, "if I lose you I don't know what I shall do! But how selfish I am. Of course I ought to be glad for her sake; it will be the best thing for Daisy."

"She would not have lived through another winter here," Mr. Middleton said; "and I cannot doubt that this offer is made to me for good, and I am very thankful. But come in and tell me, have you any fresh trouble?"

Stephanie did not speak. She followed Mr. Middleton into the house without a word.

The little drawing-room looked desolate without its mistress; her empty chair and little work-table were pushed aside, and covered with a sheet of brown-holland, telling a tale of absence and separation.

"Come into my study," Mr. Middleton said; "I dare say Susan has put my supper there. Like you, I feel this room without its presiding spirit to be dreary and uninviting."

The study was full of books and papers, and Mr. Middleton cleared a chair of a heap of magazines before Stephanie could sit down.

"There!" he said, "you see that she is wanted here to keep me tidy as well as in the drawing-room. I dare not let the little maid touch my books, as we should end in more confusion."

"When are you going away?" Stephanie asked in a low voice.

"I have just seen my vicar, who very kindly sets me free as soon as he can fill my place, and there are always plenty of curates who want places, so it may not be long. I am going down to Torquay to-morrow to see Daisy, and make some arrangements. That kind presentation the good people made me, that my wife might have the benefit of a change, sets all my pecuniary fears at rest. God is very good to us, and trust in Him for help is never in vain."

"Do you really think so?" Stephanie asked quickly. "Do you really find it is so?"

"Yes, I can say without any hesitation, *I do.*"

"I wish I could feel like that," Stephanie said, "but I never seem to have done with trouble and difficulty. Aubrey is again most unsatisfactory."

"Not again, surely. I have been so hopeful about him."

"So have I; but something has happened to-day which fills me with dread."

"About money?"

Stephanie made a sign of assent. Then she covered her face with her hands, and Mr. Middleton saw her shoulders heaving with convulsive weeping.

"Is there anything I can do?" he asked.

"No, I do not think anything can be done. If only he had loved a really good girl, her influence on him might have saved him. But Maude Lyfton is given up to finery and folly, and I expect presents to her have taught him to borrow money."

"Where is that young lady now?" Mr. Middleton asked.

"She is on her way home, alas! and will be here next week. My great hope has been that on her travels

she might meet with some one better suited to her, with a fortune to spend on her, but I am afraid that I shall be disappointed."

"I do feel more for you than I can say," Mr. Middleton exclaimed; "you seem to be weighted with the sins of other people, and I only can pray that you may go to the Strong for strength."

"You don't know," Stephanie said with sudden and passionate earnestness, "you don't know how to struggle and fight against adverse circumstances is not in itself a trouble to me. I rather like the necessity for exertion, I love work, and many a time, in the quiet library at King's Acre, I have asked myself what was to be the end of all my study, and whether I should ever have the chance of doing something for others. I used to read of the noble lives of the men and women of old times, and of some in the present too, and long to be up and doing something which should leave a trace behind me when I was dead."

"Ambition!" Mr. Middleton said quietly.

"Yes, call it ambition if you like; but I do not think it was altogether an ignoble ambition."

"I do not say it was ignoble. The desire has been fulfilled for you, though not in the way you would have chosen."

"Fulfilled! I cannot say I see it. I am checked and frustrated continually; and then when adversity came, the one person who I thought would have never proved faithless, quietly turned his back on me. I saw his marriage in *The Times* yesterday!"

"He cannot be worthy of any regret," Mr. Middleton said. "Such a man could never have been enough for you."

"I dare say not," Stephanie said. "I was very

young; I had seen nothing of the world; for we led, ever since I can remember, a secluded life, as I have often told you. But it was bitter to be cast off because trouble had come—just the time when I wanted love and sympathy. Why should I go over all this? Daisy knows it all, and has been, oh, such a comfort to me! Now I am losing her and you. It does seem as if—I scarcely like to say so; don't be shocked—it does seem as if I was to be punished with the consequences of the wrong-doing of others, and never to be allowed to surmount it, or rise above it; as if God had forgotten me, or not thought me worth His notice. And yet I have tried—I have tried to do my utmost, my best. I feel as if I were at the foot of a huge mountain, and that, try as I may, I cannot climb it, the steep path is so steep, and just while I am full of spirit, and think I have made some way, I fall back again, I am pulled back again; and I am so young still. Is it always to be so, through years, and years, and years? Always struggling and never attaining? Always thrown back, always disappointed? Yet to feel power in me and to know that it will never be of any use!”

Mr. Middleton was deeply touched. That beautiful woman, with all her gifts of mind and person, was indeed sorely tried, and he scarcely knew how to find any balm for her wounded spirit.

“I know the truth of much that you are saying by experience.”

“You! Surely you have never felt like me; you who do so much, who have left your mark in this suburb of London, where many people are lost, and their efforts for good unnoticed.”

“There are many hidden things,” he replied, “in

each one of us, in that mysterious region which Keble describes as the dwelling-place of our hermit spirits apart from all human ken; yes, even of our nearest and dearest ones. Your remark about the difficulty of ascent, and lying at the foot of a steep mountain, brings to my mind a poem written by a dear friend of mine, who has long since entered into the rest, has long since scaled those heights to which we, blinded by earth's mists and vapours, cannot lift our eyes. I have the book here. I will read you the poem if you like, while you rest in that chair? It is better than any words I could say, and those who knew the author, know that all her words were not mere words, but came like a fountain from the depths of her own gracious and sympathetic nature. I wish you could have known her; she was the most helpful person I ever knew, to young and old alike, and she had the keenest appreciation of all that was beautiful and good, and the keenest sense of the pain and misery which sin causes in this weary world."

Mr. Middleton then read the poem, and every word and line seemed to strike home to Stephanie's needs, and doubts, and fears. It was called

ASCENDING.

"Who shall ascend? We vainly look around
In hope to see men scale the mist-wrapt height;
With dim eyes, fixed upon the lowland ground,
They journey through the doubtful shades of night.
Clouds hide the summit where the Master went,
Clouds hide the end to which we feebly press,
And looming through the soul's discouragement,
We see but shadows of our worthlessness.

“Who shall ascend? Ah! but we seem to grope
Through endless labyrinths of thought and pain,
And unbelief has dug a grave for hope,
And whispers that our tears for her are vain.
We cry to one another through the gloom,
And stretch vain hands to find a kindred hand,
Death seems no more a summons, but a doom
Which waits us in a terror-stricken land.

“Who shall ascend? While all around we see
The burning wrongs and sorrows of the earth,
We cannot set our burdened brothers free,
To rise to God through human sin and death.
Who shall ascend? our love cries restlessly,
For others’ needs are sorer than our own;
We can but linger by their sides and die,
’T were worse than hell to rise to heaven alone.

“Who shall ascend? We pace with weary feet
Our life-long path of petty toil and care;
A path that still leads on where most paths meet;
And yet we know not whence it leads, or where.
My wail rang out upon the midnight sky,
And short and quick I drew my labouring breath.
All things seem harder when we come to die;
Perchance this struggling weariness means death.

“Was it a dream, that in the throbbing East
One primrose rift had rent the storm-dark blue,
And grew to glory as the throbs increased,
Till daylight at the golden door broke through?
And I was toiling up a sunlit hill,
Where some strong hand had led me in the night.
My steps were guided by some hidden will,
And I was climbing towards a world of light.

“Yet, oh, more sweet than beauty what I saw!
Through all the years, there came the Master’s voice:
‘And I, if I be lifted up, will draw
All men unto Me,’ and make the world rejoice.

He shall ascend who loves with truest love,
Leaving all paths for that which Christ has trod;
For he who lifts his brother's soul above
Stands, even now, upon the hill of God."*

"Thank you," Stephanie said. "May I look at the book?"

"You may take it and keep it till I come to claim it. I shall be off early to-morrow, and may be absent for a week. I have to see about a little house at Torquay, and to survey my new parish. Write Daisy one of your nice letters. She looks forward to them, I can tell you."

"Does she? Well, I shall find it hard to write anything but a doleful letter this time. To lose her and to lose you. Think of it!"

"I will trust you," he said cheerfully, "to put the best face on it for her sake. She has had all sorts of misgivings that she is the cause of this change, and that it may not be right for me to leave these people. But she is coming round now. Happily for us there is work to be done everywhere for God; and it does not matter so much as we think, where it is done, so that it is done loyally and honestly for Him."

Stephanie went back to her own home strangely comforted. She found her mother and Aubrey returned from the drive, and Aubrey in his most agreeable mood. Stephanie thought he even went out of the way to say pleasant things to her; and he played some games of backgammon with his mother, and seemed to be brighter and happier than for some days previously.

* This poem is taken from *Essays and Poems*, by FRANCES MARY OWEN. Published by T. Bumpas, 350, Oxford Street.

Stephanie sat up with the sheets of her manuscript before her long after the little household was in profound sleep. Outside there came at intervals the sound of the feet of people returning from Norwood or Dulwich. Sometimes there was the faint cry of an infant, borne homewards by some weary mother; now and then a woman's voice raised in shrill tones; for in suburban London the calm of the summer night is rarely unbroken, though horses and omnibuses are at rest.

Stephanie was not writing. The unfinished sheet lay before her, and the pen was idle in her hand.

Again and again she read these beautiful verses, which had been like a talisman to touch the higher and better self within her. From that night, I think, Stephanie began the upward path, with the truest aims in view, and made her resolve to leave all paths for that which the Master had trod before her.

The next day Mr. Middleton went off. The little maiden, Susan, was sent home to her mother for a holiday, and the house next door was shut up.

The post brought a letter from the editor of the *Decade*, with one of those delightful enclosures on pink paper, which are always welcome as the fruit of labour. Enclosed also was a cutting from one of the leading reviews, and directing particular attention to a paper on "Self-culture," signed ANIE.

It is not in human nature to be insensible to a favourable notice of any work, whether of art or literature, and Stephanie's eyes were bright, and her face beaming with a smile, as she took the slip to her mother, and stooping over her, kissed her, saying:

"And here is enough to pay for as many drives as

you like, mother, while the fine weather lasts. Is not that good?"

"We must try and get an easier carriage next time I venture out," was the reply; "that little chaise Aubrey had last evening did jolt so terribly. Yes, very nice, dear," Mrs. Bolingbroke continued, reading the notice, "very nice. You are so like your father, so clever and intellectual."

Oh, was that all! It came like a cold blast on the warm heart's joy, and Stephanie gently took away the slip and the cheque, and went to her own table to write an acknowledgment of both in her clear, business-like hand. She had just done this when a telegraph boy came up to the door, whistling merrily as he came.

Stephanie did not give him time to ring. She was in the little passage, and at the door in a moment.

Stephanie opened the envelope with a strange foreshadowing of evil tidings.

She read the few words again and again, and was awoke, as from a dream, by the boy saying:

"There's a paid answer, miss. Will you write it?"

Stephanie turned away from the door, and saw Mrs. Sparkes looking at her from the top of the stairs which led to her dominion below.

"Bad news, miss?" she asked; for Stephanie's face was deadly white.

"No; at least, I think not"—then quickly, "Do not say anything to mother, Mrs. Sparkes, she may not have noticed the boy. I did not give him time to ring."

Mrs. Sparkes had followed Stephanie into her room, and stood with her hands under her apron, looking at her anxiously.

The telegram was soon written:

"Albert Hardman, Lancaster Gate. I will come."

That was all. Stephanie handed it to Mrs. Sparkes, saying:

"It was a paid answer; give it to the boy." Then she sat motionless for a few minutes.

Mrs. Sparkes retreated down to the basement again, greatly wondering, but feeling that it was not her business to ask questions. In less than a quarter of an hour she was surprised to see Miss Bolingbroke standing by her side, dressed to go out.

"Mrs. Sparkes," she said, "I have to go out on business; it may keep me for some time; and I shall certainly not be home to luncheon. Will you see Mrs. Bolingbroke has hers nicely sent up? and do not let her be disturbed by any visitors till I return."

Then Stephanie opened the drawing-room door and said cheerfully:

"I am going out, mother. I may not be home till the afternoon. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, dear. If you see *The Queen* at the station, will you bring it?" And then Stephanie was gone.

"Why does he send for me to Lancaster Gate instead of his office?" she thought. "What can be his reason? Bad news," so the telegram said. "It is Aubrey; of course it is Aubrey. Bad news!" and then a dreadful suspicion flashed upon her. "That money! that fifty pounds which had paid the jeweller's bill! Had he stolen it? Was it possible?" A cold shudder passed through Stephanie's whole frame. A man in the railway carriage noticed it, and said:

"Allow me to shut the window, if you feel the air too much."

Stephanie bowed her head; she could not speak.

Generally Stephanie trusted to her own powers of locomotion, and had become quite accustomed to find her way about London. But to-day she called a cab, and drove straight to Lancaster Gate.

The door was opened by a footman in gorgeous livery, who called her name to another who stood nearer the foot of the stairs.

Stephanie's courage rose when the interview was inevitable, and little would anyone have guessed what was the mission on which that tall and stately lady had come, who had seen her follow the servant to the library where Mr. Hardman sat.

All that money could do was done in that room. Mr. Hardman loved show and fine things; and he had ordered his rooms to be painted and decorated after those of a "noble lord," who was his neighbour, and who was considered a leader of fashion in his home and appointments.

"Take the house," he had said to a great London firm of art decorators, "and do just as if it was for one of your noble customers; and mind, cash down when the contract is fulfilled."

"Cash down" was doubtless a very pleasant consideration for the decorators, and quickened their zeal to do their best and utmost.

The thick carpets in the library made Stephanie's light tread unheard, and it was not till the man had approached his master with the announcement: "Miss

Bolingbroke," that he turned from his writing-table and confronted her.

"Oh," he said, "you've not been long in coming then. Sit down, pray;" and addressing the servant in that tone which almost always betrays that servants have not always been at the speaker's beck and call, "Bring champagne cup and biscuits at once."

"You look dead beat," he continued. "I am awfully put out, and that's the truth; for it's very unpleasant to have to say to any young lady what I must say to you—that your brother is a thief. It's no suspicion; we've proved it. He is at the office now, under care of one of my men; and there I'll keep him till you make up your mind what to do."

Up to this time Stephanie had not spoken. She was, after all, but a girl of scarcely four and twenty. It was a sore thrust indeed to hear these words spoken in a metallic voice that thrilled through her—"Your brother is a thief." But she struggled for composure and said: "How much—what is the amount?"

"That's nothing. You don't think I care for a paltry fifty pounds; I'd as soon it was fifty pence; but I ain't doing my duty if I let it pass. I must prosecute him; and it will make a pretty story in the papers. The son too of a man who has left behind no very fair name in the mercantile world, eh?"

"It is very cruel of you to go back to the past. I do not ask you to—to forgive my poor brother. But will you not wait till I can repay you? Will you for his mother's sake? I can work. I have the power. I will pay you back every farthing."

"Rubbish!" was the reply. "Now look here. The

whole thing shall be hushed up. I will pay that young rascal's voyage out to Australia. I will give him money to start in a business. I will do this on one condition—that you marry me off-hand. Come, and let me put you in a position few men can command. I'll give you town house and country house. You shall do as you please. You shall ——”

He came near her, and leaned over her chair, as she sat with her hands clasped and her beautiful face colourless.

The entrance of the servant with the refreshments Mr. Hardman had ordered made a momentary diversion.

Mr. Hardman went to the tray, and poured out some champagne into a large glass in which ice sparkled. He held it to Stephanie's lips, and said, “Drink it at once, or you'll faint.”

She obeyed half mechanically, and then, with a long sigh, seemed to recover consciousness.

“Now look here,” he said, when the door had closed on the servant again—“look here. I love you; and I'll be kind to you. Why, I am not such a bad-looking fellow, am I? My dear mother thinks me perfect, that she does. Come now!”

But Stephanie started to her feet.

“I will not marry you,” she said; “I will not!”

“Very well; then I take proceedings at once. I'll see the thing is properly noised abroad. I'll write a paragraph for the London papers this very night, and let the world know the son is walking in his father's steps. There, now you have my mind!”

“How could I sin against you and against God by making such a disgraceful compromise? Oh, it is very,

very cruel! You are hard-hearted and cruel to press me thus!"

"No, I am not. It's my love for you, it is. I want to have you; and say the word, and never a breath of this business shall reach anybody's ears—only say the word."

Stephanie was again silent.

"Give me time; I implore you, give me time." Her pleading, tearful eyes touched even Mr. Hardman's heart.

"Time! How long?"

"This is Tuesday; wait till Thursday before you take any steps against Aubrey. Let me see him; let him come home, and——"

"What good will that do? But I declare I can't refuse you anything. I believe I'm a fool to wait; but mind, I wait because I don't want to seem an ogre in your eyes."

As he spoke he was turning over in his mind the probability that the boy's entreaties, and the mother's, might have more effect on her than his own.

"Yes," he said, "I'll wait. I will drive to the office, and let the young fellow go home with you. I would not trust him to go home without you; he is as slippery as an eel. You must eat some luncheon, first, and then we'll order the brougham, and drive to Holborn, and I'll send you to Norwood. Come, you can't say I ain't full of consideration. You are my queen you know, and I'm your slave, that's about it."

"Let us go at once," Stephanie said. "I want no luncheon."

"But I do," he said. "I don't live on air," and he

rang the bell violently. "Luncheon," he said, "and tell Mrs. Hardman to come down. I want her."

The gong sounded almost immediately, and the servant threw open the door, when there entered a little lady, dressed in black silk, with a shawl over her shoulders, and a white cap which had a shadowy likeness to that of a widow's.

"This lady stays to luncheon, mother; Miss Bolingbroke. Show us the way to the dining-room."

Mrs. Hardman looked up curiously in Stephanie's face. She was greatly puzzled, but a wholesome fear of her son kept her from asking questions.

"Have you had a long walk?" she said. "You look tired, my dear; you must try and eat a good luncheon."

Mr. Hardman watched Stephanie as she seated herself at the table—a table spread with every delicacy handed by obsequious footmen. He watched her eyes as they looked round on the many beautiful pictures which hung on the walls. They were a part of the "decoration" which had been decreed as necessary; but Mr. Hardman had, I need scarcely say, no taste to guide him, and he was dependent on the taste of others, which fortunately had in this case been good.

There was not any conversation; that was an art of which Mr. Hardman knew nothing. He jerked out a few commonplaces, while his mother looked at him in a deprecating way whenever she ventured to address Stephanie.

It was, she knew, not considered "genteel" to press a guest to eat, but she could not refrain from saying now and then, "Do take a little more chicken, miss,"

or, "Try the aspick jelly, won't you? The plovers' eggs are tasty; won't you take one?"

Poor Stephanie could hardly swallow anything, and it was only to avoid notice that she allowed the various dishes to be placed before her, and remain untasted.

Mr. Hardman leaned back in his chair, watching her with eyes which were too full of hungry admiration to be pleasant.

It was a half hour of torture; when would it end? And what should be her next step? There was the dreaded meeting with her brother; there was the still more dreaded meeting with her mother to come. Mr. Middleton was away; if only he had been there. Mr. Swifte must know, she must appeal to him for help. Then there arose in her mind the words of that poem, which, since Mr. Middleton had read it to her, she had read and re-read till she knew it by heart. Surely the last verse was full of hope:

"He shall ascend who loves with truest love,
Leaving all paths for that which Christ has trod."

"All paths!" Now hers was a path of bitter humiliation; but she, even she, might ascend by it to the hill of God, if only she was faithful in following in the steps of Christ.

"I will do what I believe to be right; I will leave the result with God," was her final resolution; "and nothing shall tempt me to do evil, that this present distress may be relieved."

The look of weariness and despair left her face, and a light shone on it as she rose from the table and passed out of that grand dining-room with the little

homely woman, who sat at the head of that flower-strewn table.

"Ah, ha! One day and I'll see her mistress here," was Mr. Hardman's thought; but he said aloud to the servant, "The landau at two o'clock," and left Stephanie to go upstairs to the little sitting-room at the top of the first flight of stairs, "the wing" of the great house where old Mrs. Hardman chose to live in retirement, unless summoned, as to-day, by her son to do his bidding.

CHAPTER V.

BAFFLED.

MRS. HARDMAN'S room was a positive relief after the cold grandeur of the rest of the house. There was an air of homely comfort about it. Even the tabby-cat's purr, as she sat blinking in the sunshine on a footstool, had a home-like sound.

"Sit down, dear," Mrs. Hardman said, "and rest a bit. This is my own room; my bedroom opens out of it. Albert is a good son to me, and likes to keep me near him. I like the cottage in the country, where he was born, best, but he does not wish me to be so far off. My husband was a gardener, and took fruit and vegetables to market. We were quite humble people, but"—with a sigh—"very happy people. Albert always had something in him different from us; he did not care for the country, and liked to go to London to try his fortune. He made it, as you see, from small beginnings, and he is now scarcely forty, and a very rich man. His poor father never lived to see his prosperity; but when I lost him Albert had enough to buy our little cottage, and he tells me he has had it made very pretty, and wanted some gentlefolks, who had fallen in fortunes, to live in it. I don't know whether they have done so. I daresay you came to see my son on business," Mrs. Hardman ventured to

ask. "He is very liberal; if you want help, he will give it."

The little ripple of talk had gone on while Mrs. Hardman had knitted at a stocking she had taken up, and Stephanie had heard almost as if she had not heard.

"Albert has a kind heart, but sometimes he is a little rough—not to me—and has such a will of his own! He keeps me like a lady, and I might have anything I asked for, only I don't want anything. He has gentlemen to dine sometimes, but of course no ladies. My only hope is for him, that he may at least find a good wife, who will teach him to care for the things which will last when all that the earth can give is over and done with. There! that's the gong. The carriage is round."

Stephanie started to her feet. Her dream was over. The soft murmur of the old mother's voice would be exchanged for the loud resonant tones of the son; and what an ordeal was before her.

She turned as she was leaving the room, and going up to Mrs. Hardman, said:

"Pray for me, for I am in great trouble."

"I will indeed, my dear; I will indeed. Albert will help you, if man's help avails; but it is our Heavenly Father in whom we must put our trust, in all sorrow."

Stephanie did not speak; but bending her head, she pressed her lips on the old lady's forehead, and followed the servant to the hall, where Mr. Hardman was waiting.

The drive in the luxurious carriage was for the most

part silent. Stephanie sat with folded hands, and her face turned towards the window.

As they went through the Park the throng of gay people was thickening, both on foot and in carriages.

Sometimes a block brought the carriage to a standstill, and Stephanie had time to scan the faces of the occupants of other carriages. Happy mothers with their little children, all smiles and pride in their appearances; discontented young faces too; men to whom the hot chase of pleasure had become a weariness. On they went cityward, and the character of the crowd changed. Toilers in the street, hurrying to and fro, intent on their business; cabs full of luggage; huge omnibuses, towering high above the crowded thoroughfare; the ragged and forlorn lingering by the shop windows, where the tempting cakes and buns seemed to mock their hunger; little street urchins scuffling in and out the throng, dirty and merry in spite of circumstances; and on all sides the patient policemen, with outstretched arms guiding the traffic and helping perplexed foot-passengers to cross the crowded streets. One woman with a pale face, down which tears were coursing each other, struck Stephanie as the carriage drew up at the door of the office in Holborn, and she saw Mr. Hardman fling her a piece of silver, and heard her say, "God bless you, sir!" So there was at least one to give him his benison in that great surging crowd of the city thoroughfare.

Mr. Hardman led the way along a dark passage, and Stephanie saw through glass screens rows of desks in the offices, where men, young and old, were bending over books. At the left of a short flight of stairs Mr. Hardman pushed open a swing-door, and then opened

an inner one, where a gray-haired man sat at a table, and beyond him, with his head on his hands, was Aubrey. He looked up at his sister, and meeting her sorrowful gaze, his head sank again on his folded arms.

"Mr. Gray," Mr. Hardman said, "you can leave the room."

The old clerk rose at once, gathered up some papers, and turned to the door.

"Wait a bit, Gray," Mr. Hardman said; "I think you are the only person besides myself in the office who knows that this theft of fifty sovereigns has been traced to Mr. Bolingbroke."

"That is so, sir; and I have no desire that it should go further if any arrangement can be made. I discovered the deficit and the wrong entry in the cash-book. It was my duty to refer the matter to you, sir, but I deeply regret I had to do so. As you know, it followed on other irregularities which I have had occasion to mention."

"Exactly, Gray; you did your duty. I now ask, or rather I order you, not to let this matter go further till you hear from me on Friday morning; no steps will be taken till then. I may trust you, Mr. Gray, I think."

"You may, sir;" and then Mr. Gray bowed and departed.

Stephanie had meantime gone nearer to Aubrey, and laid her hand on his head—that young head with its light hair bowed with the sense of shame.

"Now look here, youngster," Mr. Hardman said, as he stood with his back to the mantelpiece, "you have got yourself into a hole, and I suppose you have nothing to say for yourself. I ought to have you up be-

fore the magistrates, but it is in your sister's hands to prevent this. I have proposed a way of escape for you through her means. You may go home with her, and hear what she has to say. She is to give me an answer on Friday morning."

"Sir," Aubrey began, at last standing upright and facing Mr. Hardman, "I never intended to rob you. I—I meant to replace the money. I——"

"Humbug!" was the rejoinder. "That won't pay. You have been trying the same game before, you know."

The colour rushed to Aubrey's face, and he said:

"I repaid a small sum; it was borrowed."

"I want to hear no more rubbishy excuses. My carriage is at the door, and you and your sister will be driven to Herne Hill. On Friday morning I shall come there to hear her decision. You understand me," he said, addressing Stephanie; there is no need of further parley; and yet——" He advanced a step as if he were about to take her hand, his face kindling with the genuine admiration and love, as such a man is capable of understanding the word, he felt for her. But Stephanie drew back and said:

"Yes; by Friday you shall know my decision. Now, Aubrey."

Mr. Hardman felt that he dare not approach Stephanie any nearer. He opened the door, touched a bell on the table, and a porter appeared.

"Show this lady to the carriage, and let the coachman take her orders."

The porter much wondering obeyed, and the brother and sister passed out of the room and along the narrow passage.

"Bolingbroke going off in the boss's carriage," said one of the young clerks; "what a pet he is."

"And who is that lady?" asked another.

Then Mr. Gray's voice was heard.

"Gentlemen, there is a great deal of work to be got through to-day, which gossip hinders. I'll thank you to be silent."

When the carriage door was closed, and the long drive began, Stephanie turned to Aubrey.

"Oh, Aubrey, how *could* you do this thing, and bring sorrow on mother? It will kill her."

"I was mad, I think," Aubrey said. "It was all for Maude's sake."

"Maude!"

"Yes, fool that I was. She was always telling me of the fine things other fellows gave her, and that a young Scotchman had presented her with a necklace of some trumpery pebbles, and I determined to outdo him, and went and ordered that brooch. I had given her the earrings. You see, Stephanie, I do love her, I do indeed, and I—I could not bear to think I should lose her."

"So you actually thought a love that could be *bribed* was worth having. Oh, Aubrey, I do pity you!"

There was a ring of contempt in her voice which Aubrey could not fail to notice.

"Pity me! yes, you may well pity me; but now tell me, what does he mean? He says you can save me from public disgrace if you choose. What does that vulgar snob mean? Fancy our being in such hands. A man who is a contemptible *nouveau riche*."

"Aubrey, it does not become you to speak in that

way of a man whose confidence you have betrayed, and whom you have robbed and cheated. I must consult Mr. Swifte."

"No, not Mr. Swifte; pray don't do that," Aubrey said.

"Yes, I have no one else to apply to. I shall tell him everything."

"But what does Hardman mean about you saving me?"

"He asked me to marry him; and on that condition he will send you away to Australia, and pay all your expenses, and let this matter be hushed up."

"Marry *him*! What impudence!"

"And yet—yet you could wish me to do this thing. *Could* you, Aubrey?"

"Well, you see, it would save us all, and I daresay you would have everything your own way; and he has sixty thousand a year."

Stephanie's lip curled with something very like scorn as she said, in a low, bitter tone, "I am afraid I cannot serve you in this way, Aubrey, but I will try to do it in another. I now only ask you to keep quietly at home to-morrow, and I shall do my best to help you; but not in *that* way. I pray you to be considerate to our poor mother."

"Oh, don't tell her! Why should you tell her?"

"Alas! she must know sooner or later, and, I should think, her sorrow will be one of your bitterest punishments."

"Oh, Stephanie, do keep it quiet if you can! What should I do if Maude knows?"

"I don't wish to spare her, she is older than you

are, and has taken advantage, shameful advantage, of your weakness and folly. No, Maude shall not be spared."

The rest of the drive was silent, but by the time the carriage stopped at 6, Victoria Villas, Stephanie's mind was made up.

Aubrey got out first, and went upstairs, passing Mrs. Sparkes, who had come quickly to the door when she caught a glimpse from the window of her basement story of the fine carriage stopping before her house.

Stephanie found her mother serene and quiet, much interested in a new story Aubrey had bought from Smiths' bookstall.

"My dear Stephanie, I have been wondering what had become of you. Is anything wrong?"

"Yes, mother," Stephanie said quietly.

"Something is always wrong," poor Mrs. Bolingbroke exclaimed pitifully. "We never have any peace!"

"Dear mother," Stephanie said, "I am going to send for Mr. Swifte, to consult him. I shall go to the Post-office and send him a telegram, and when he comes I will tell you more."

The telegram was despatched, and brought Mr. Swifte about six o'clock.

Stephanie took him into her room, and there, in as few words as possible, told him the story.

Mr. Swifte was terribly distressed, and listened with profound sympathy.

"Now," Stephanie said, when she had finished her sad history, "will you help me to carry out a plan I have made? The half-yearly dividend of my mother's will be due very soon, and I have thirty pounds of my

literary earnings untouched. I want to get Aubrey out of the country; and I want to pay Mr. Hardman, through you, this money of which my brother robbed him. My mother and I must go to some place where no one will think of finding us. What I want you to promise is, that you will keep our address from everyone. You can get mother's dividends for her, cannot you?"

"Certainly," Mr. Swifte said, "by a power of attorney."

"Yes, I thought so; and you will not let Mrs. Swifte or anyone know where we are. But," she said, putting her hand to her head, "there is so much to do, and so much to think of first. I mean to leave most of our things here, and let Mrs. Sparke let the house with the addition to the furniture, and perhaps you can get what would not fit in here sold. But to take Aubrey's passage at once is the first thing; we must try and do that to-morrow. When is Maude Lyfton coming home?"

"Not till Saturday, fortunately. Oh, Miss Bolingbroke, how deeply I regret that this attachment to my adopted daughter has been the cause of this great trouble!"

"You must not say so; there is no excuse for Aubrey. He is weak, oh, so weak! Unless this proves a bitter lesson which he will never forget, I dare not think of what will become of him."

"But he must leave the country, or Mr. Hardman will carry out his threats."

"I know he will unless I accept his hateful proposal. Oh, how can he make it! it seems so unmanly, so cruel."

"He is a brute to persecute you; but we will cir-

cumvent him. I will lose no time. I must go home and think over the plan, and I will be with you early to-morrow. Have you told Mrs. Bolingbroke your determination?"

"No; that is the hardest part, and is yet to come."

It was a never-to-be-forgotten evening to Stephanie. Tears and lamentations from her mother which went to her heart. Separation from her boy; grief at losing him, as she said, for ever. Aubrey's passionate protestations of amendment, weak excuses for the past, weaker promises for the future.

"And you might save my mother and me from this cruel grief."

"Yes," Mrs. Bolingbroke said. "Oh, Stephanie, is it impossible? He may be a good and worthy man; and we are fallen so low, we need not count too much on birth and family."

This was indeed hard to bear patiently. Stephanie lost her self-control, and exclaimed almost angrily:

"So you would ask me to sin against all my convictions of right, sin against God and man, to save Aubrey from public disgrace, and you from losing him? No, mother, I will not consent to such a shameful compromise. How can you ask me to do so?"

"And where am I to go?" Aubrey asked helplessly, "and what am I to do?"

"He is delicate; he has never been used to any rough life. Oh, Stephanie, you are sending him away to die!"

Poor Stephanie! Of all the bitter trials she had gone through, this seemed the hardest to bear; but she did not falter.

"Mr. Swifte will arrange it for the best. I have every confidence in him."

"Will he let me see her once more? I must see Maude once more," Aubrey faltered out.

"That is impossible; she doesn't return till Saturday."

How Stephanie got through the days that followed she never knew. Courage and an indomitable will were not in themselves enough to uphold her. There was a cry from the depth of her soul for help, which was surely heard and answered by God. Light was in her darkness—light breaking through the dark cloud, in which she could see the bow of hope.

So she was upborne through these sad days. It was all arranged as Mr. Swifte thought best. Aubrey's passage was taken. Stephanie went with her brother to the Docks, and before they parted he held her in a long embrace. Something of his sister's nobleness and courage seemed to strike him in that hour of parting, and he said:

"I will do as you say. I will try to redeem the past. I will work, and I will do my best, only, Stephanie, can you see Maude, and give her this letter?"

"She shall have the letter," Stephanie said; "but I cannot see her. I shall be far away from London to-morrow."

"Shall I never hear from you, never know anything about you?"

"Mr. Swifte will forward letters addressed to his care, and I will write to you."

In these last moments Stephanie's heart melted with

compassion for the boy she had played with in childhood, who had, as elder sister, been her pet and idol; whose beauty and winning ways had been in early boyhood so attractive.

"Dear Aubrey," she said, "I will *hope*. Do not disappoint me. The past is forgiven, and the day may come when I shall be proud, not ashamed, of my brother."

So they parted, and Stephanie, overcome with emotion, was led away by Mr. Swifte, and put into a cab and driven to his office.

He let her weep, undisturbed even by a sign of sympathy, and when they reached his office, Stephanie was able to enter into all the final arrangements, and Mr. Swifte was full of admiration of the way in which she entered into every business detail; and how clear her head was for money matters, in which some women get in a hopeless maze.

It was not till Thursday evening, when Stephanie and her mother, as well as poor Aubrey, were well out of reach, that Mr. Swifte told his wife of all that had happened.

Mrs. Swifte wept many tears over the story, as her husband told it in plain, unvarnished terms.

"What will Maude say? How will Maude bear the news? Who is to tell her?"

"I have a letter for her from the poor, unhappy boy which will explain everything. I am not afraid for Maude; she won't break her heart. She has spirit enough to carry her through anything," said Mr. Swifte. "Yes, she will soon be consoled, never fear."

"You are always so hard on poor Maude," Mrs.

Swifte said, "and yet no one is more amused and cheered by her than you are. You said the other day how glad you would be to get her home again."

"That is very true," Mr. Swifte said; "but the women who amuse us, and are gay and light-hearted, are not always those on whom we lean in times of trouble, and not those who feel trouble, either for themselves or others, very deeply. But I don't want to misjudge Maude; she may have more heart than I give her credit for."

"Everyone can't be like Miss Bolingbroke," Mrs. Swifte said. "I know some people think her very haughty and proud; though I am sure she was sweet to me, and thanked me for the little kindness I was able to show her."

"Miss Bolingbroke is one in ten thousand, Mary. I never knew a woman like her."

And then Mr. Swifte left his wife to meditate on the story he had just told her, and to wonder what Maude would say and do under such trying circumstances.

From the little we know of Maude Lyfton, I think we may be content to take Mr. Swifte's view of the case, and to hope at least she will not break her heart.

Mr. Hardman's brougham drove up early on Friday morning to No. 6, Victoria Villas, on the Herne Hill Road. He saw a board up, on a leaning pole, with the announcement—"This house to let, furnished."

"Ah, ah! that's a step in the right direction," he thought. He had no misgivings when he gave a sharp rat-tat-tat at the door, which was immediately opened by Mrs. Sparkes.

Mr. Hardman felt in good-humour and spirits, and said, "Good-morning. Can I see Miss Bolingbroke?"

Mrs. Sparkes retreated into the little sitting-room, saying, "Will you please to walk in, sir?"

The blinds in the little baywindow were drawn down, and there was an air of desertion about everything, which Mr. Hardman noticed.

"If you please, sir, there's a letter for you I was to give you."

And Mrs. Sparkes took a sealed envelope from the chimney-piece, holding it between the corner of her apron as if afraid to touch it.

"A letter? What does it mean?" Mr. Hardman exclaimed as he tore open the envelope, and then read, "I return the money which is due to you, and I regret that your kindness to my brother should have been so ill-rewarded. I can only ask you to forgive him.—S. B."

Mr. Hardman read the few words again and again, his hand trembling, his face convulsed with passion. He crumpled up the clean, crisp Bank of England note in his clenched hand, and turning at last to Mrs. Sparkes, said, "Where is Miss Bolingbroke? Where is her mother?"

"Indeed, sir, I don't know. They left here early yesterday morning."

"Yesterday morning?" And then a torrent of words was poured forth which we will not write here. It is enough to say Mr. Hardman raged in his fury like a madman, and that poor little Mrs. Sparkes trembled with fear.

"Look here, woman, take this" — holding out the bank-note—"and tell me where the ladies are gone."

"But I don't know, sir; I don't know. The young lady, bless her! behaved like an angel. There has been great trouble, though I don't rightly know what the trouble is. She paid me every farthing, and left all her pretty things here, that I might get a good let, and the house is now furnished quite fit for gentry. She kissed me when she left, poor darling. She never slept a wink for three nights. She was up writing and packing the things for the young gent, who left the night before last; and she and her mamma went off yesterday morning. That is all I know, sir, and all I wish to know; for the dear young lady said, 'No one is to know where we are going, so I can't tell you, Mrs. Sparkes; but I'll always think of you, and you must pray for me.'"

Mrs. Sparkes wiped away a very genuine tear; and Mr. Hardman strode out of the room, across the narrow passage into the opposite one.

There were more signs of Stephanie's presence—some large envelopes and lined foolscap paper. One of the envelopes was addressed to the editor of the *Decade*. Mr. Hardman snatched it up and put it into his pocket.

"I will track you, my lady, never fear," he said.

"What has become of the parson next door, eh?" he asked of Mrs. Sparkes.

"They have left the place, sir; and the house is shut up till they move their furniture."

"Ah! but there's Swifte, of course, the lawyer. I'll go to him. He will know—he will know. And there's the bank, of course. There's a branch here, of course;

they have one in every suburb. Well, good-morning," Mr. Hardman said more graciously. "And look here," he said, taking out a card and slipping it with a sovereign into Mrs. Sparkes' hand, "if you ever hear where Miss Bolingbroke is, or anything about her, come to me at this address, and I'll make it worth your while."

And then Mr. Hardman left the astonished Mrs. Sparkes struck dumb with wonder, and relieved that, at any rate, her strange visitor had gone without doing himself, or her, or any of the furniture, any mischief; "for he raved like a wild bull when he opened the letter," she said. "Dear, what should I have done if Sparkes had had a temper like that? He might be a little fidgety at times, but he never flew into passions like that. Well, I am thankful the dear young lady is safe off. I suppose he is in love with her; a strange way of showing love. I am glad she is safe out of his clutches. I don't feel as if his money would do me any good, but it comes in handy now the house is empty, and no rent coming in," was the philosophical termination of Mrs. Sparkes' soliloquy.

"The National Provincial Bank" was the order shouted to the footman, and at the bank, after taking several wrong turns, the carriage stopped.

The manager, in his little private room, was somewhat excited as he read the name on the card. He hoped the great millionaire might have come to open an account for that district. He was bland and courteous, and begged Mr. Hardman to take a chair.

"No; I am in haste, thank you. I came to ask a question. Have you a customer on your books by the name of Bolingbroke?"

"Bolingbroke! Yes; but the account was closed yesterday."

"Overdrawn?"

"Certainly not, I think; but I can make sure by reference to the ledger. The account was some seventy pounds, on credit."

"Have you any notion where Miss Bolingbroke is gone?"

"Not the slightest; and it was not my business to enquire."

The manager began to think his visitor's questions extraordinary, not to say impertinent, and his manner, at first so bland, changed.

"It's my business," was the sharp rejoinder; and then Mr. Hardman's large form was seen proceeding through the office, nearly upsetting a meek little man who had come to pay in some money over the counter.

Mr. Swifte expected Mr. Hardman's visit, and stood on guard; determined, whatever happened, he would try to keep his temper, and allow himself to be roundly abused without comment.

"Yes," he said, "I have the charge of Mrs. Bolingbroke's affairs; but at this moment I do not know her address."

"That's a lie!" was the polite rejoinder.

"If you consider me, sir, so utterly untrustworthy, I wonder you should question me at all. But I may add, that if I did know Mrs. Bolingbroke's address, or when I do know it, nothing will tempt me to break faith with her daughter and reveal it, till I have permission to do so."

"And the escaped felon, what of him?"

"He is beyond reach; and, I hope, on the way to lead a better life."

"I suppose you aided and abetted Miss Bolingbroke in sending me that trumpery fifty pounds. Now look here, sir, I am not to be checkmated. I will not rest till I throw that money back whence it came, and take some revenge."

"You will, I hope, think better of such cowardly and detestable behaviour towards a young lady whose conduct has been throughout, as I happen to know better than any one, beyond all praise. She is a noble and beautiful woman," he said, "and I could blush for the man who, like yourself, has persecuted her, and vented on her head the sins of her brother."

"I did no such thing. I offered her what few women can command. I would free her from all these miserable cares; I would——"

Mr. Hardman stopped, and Mr. Swifte saw his face working convulsively.

What if this rough, loud-voiced man did really love Stephanie?

"We need not prolong this interview, Mr. Hardman, if you please. I am bound in honour to respect my clients' wishes in all cases, and in this case, I may say, it is my pleasure as well as my duty to respect them."

Mr. Hardman took up his hat and rushed out of the office, saying:

"I am not to be beaten; see if I am. If I am, it will be for the first time in my life."

Then he flung himself into his carriage again, and the footman waited by the door for orders.

"The *Decade* office," Mr. Hardman said, reading

the address from the envelope he had seized from Stephanie's table; "The *Decade* office, Paternoster Square;" and again the carriage rolled off.

CHAPTER VI.

A VAIN SEARCH.

"THERE is a gentleman waiting to see you, sir."

The editor of the *Decade*, and the member of a large publishing firm in London, pushed aside a pile of papers, took the card from the hand of one of his clerks, and glancing at the name—Mr. Albert Hardman—said, "What does he want? A roll of manuscript under his arm, I suppose?"

"No, sir," and the clerk smiled. "I don't think a manuscript is in the case this time."

"Very well, show him up."

A heavy tread, but a quick one, as of someone in hot haste, was heard on the staircase, and Mr. Hardman's large, portly figure stood at the door.

"Mr. Wright, I suppose," the visitor said, taking out a large silk pocket-handkerchief and wiping his forehead.

"I am Messrs. Wright and Thornley's representative."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said Mr. Hardman, sitting down with a heavy thud on a leather-covered chair opposite the table at which Messrs. Wright and Thornley's

representative was seated, making the chair creak under his weight.

"I am Mr. Albert Hardman; you have my card."

The editor bowed.

"You know me, of course."

"I am afraid I must plead ignorance," was the reply.

"Dear, bless me! Not know *me*? Why my name is as well known as the Monument or St. Paul's. The great firm of plumbago merchants, sir, is mine. I am senior and junior partner all in one. We keep the name of Hardman, Beamish, and Co., but the B. has been dead for years, and the Co. means your humble servant. You know the trick, I daresay; a trick of the trade, eh?"

The editor began to feel irritated and impatient. That large gold chain and those rings were an offence to him, and the hard, metallic voice, with its provincial tone, jarred on his nerves.

"May I ask your business, sir? I am rather heavily weighted with correspondence this morning as my co-adjutor is absent from illness; therefore, I may say, my time is precious."

"Sir," said Mr. Hardman, "I came to ask you a question, and I take it you can answer it. You publish a magazine called the *Decade*. I have bought a copy every month of late, and I daresay I shall buy dozens more. In that magazine there are stories and sketches signed 'Stephanie.'"

The editor bowed again.

"Give me her whereabouts, tell me her address at this moment."

"I am afraid I cannot do so," was the reply.

"Pray why not, sir?"

"I do not know that I am obliged to give you a reason; surely you understand that publishers are bound to keep back the names of their authors, if it is desired."

"I know her name, sir. I know it; and, by Jove"—and the large hand, on which diamonds flashed, came down with a heavy blow on the editor's table. "I don't want her name, I want her address; what's more, I'll have it?"

"Not from me, sir," was the quiet reply. "At this moment I do not know it absolutely."

"But you will know it; you will know it."

"Probably, 'Stephanie' is a contributor we should be sorry to lose."

"Will you let me have that young lady's address, when you *do* know it, eh?"

"No, sir. I must leave you to discover it from some other source. Pardon me, I am much engaged this morning," and the editor touched a hand-bell, which gave a sharp *ding*.

"You don't mean to say, sir, that you refuse my request? Then you are no gentleman, that's all I've got to say."

The editor smiled a quiet smile, which must have been very irritating, and said, "I never break my faith with anyone who is so good as to trust me, and I am quite content to endure any imputation you may be pleased to cast upon me."

"Imputation! imputation!" exclaimed Mr. Hardman. Then suddenly changing his tone, and lowering his

voice, with a disagreeable wink of his eye, he rose and came round, and said in a low voice, in the editor's ear, "Magazines, even the best, want a lot of capital, so I've been told. I have plenty of cash lying loose. Name a figure, and you won't find me niggardly. Come, any sum of three or even four figures, as a fair exchange for Stephanie's address, when you've got it."

The editor was on his feet in an instant; the bell was touched again, not once, but twice. The clerk who answered the summons never forgot the concentrated contempt which sounded in the words, "Show this gentleman to the door, and if he calls again refuse him admittance."

"You will repent this, sir," Mr. Hardman said in a choked voice. "You will live to repent that you treated me like this. *Me*, who could buy up your paltry rubbish here, and you into the bargain, if you were worth the trouble. *Me*, whose carriage and pair is waiting below. *Me*, who have——"

Mr. Hardman's angry tones brought several officials from an inner room to the spot; and one, a grey-haired man, who had held the post of chief clerk for many years in Messrs. Wright and Thornley's publishing house, put his hand on Mr. Hardman's arm:

"Will you kindly make room, sir, a lady is waiting to pass you;" and then, with a somewhat firm pressure on his shoulder, Mr. Hardman was conducted downstairs.

The carriage was waiting for him, and the footman in his fine livery was too well accustomed to his master's bursts of fury to be as surprised as the clerks in Mr.

Wright's office were at the muttered imprecations with which he threw himself back in his carriage, shouting the word "Home" as the door was closed, and the footman nimbly mounted to his seat as the carriage drove off.

"There's something up!" exclaimed the footman; "he is in an awful fury."

The coachman, who had driven real gentry for some years before he had become Mr. Hardman's servant, sat in stolid silence, and made no response to the footman's remarks. If his master went into ten thousand furies, it was not that young Jackanapes' business to comment on them; he knew his place better.

Mr. Hardman returned to his house in Lancaster Gate in an unenviable frame of mind. He had been thwarted and baffled, and the plan he thought he had made so cleverly to secure Stephanie had utterly failed. As was generally the case, his determination to gain what he wanted grew stronger from the difficulties which stood in his way.

He went up to his mother's room. She was peacefully seated with her work, and a little table by her side had a few books upon it, on the pages of which she now and then mused for a little while, and then returned to her needlecraft.

The canary was singing in his cage, and the cat was purring at her feet.

"Well, Albert dear, you look very hot and tired. Has anything vexed you? What is it?"

"What is it?" he repeated snappishly; "you may well ask. You saw that lady here the other day at luncheon?"

"Yes; and very pretty and sweet I thought her. She had seen a great deal of trouble, she said, and I told her you would help her, I knew, if you could."

"Help her! I took her rascally brother into my office out of charity, and he rewarded me by robbing me."

"Oh, my dear Albert!"

"Yes, I told her—his sister—that I would just let the whole affair be hushed up on one condition, and one only."

"What was that, Albert? What was that?"

"That she married me. I gave her three days to think over it, fool that I was; and when I went this morning to the cottage they were living in out Norwood way they were clean gone. I have lost scent of her and the young villain, her brother; but I shall go to Scotland Yard, and set the police off on the track. I'll be revenged on them both, or my name is not Albert Hardman."

"Oh, my dear son, don't take vengeance! Leave it to the Lord."

"Vengeance! Yes, I will take it. If she had married me, I would never have said a word, nor exposed the fellow; but now I'll never rest till I have punished them both."

"Not her, Albert, not her; she is so beautiful and winning! I knew she was in some trouble, though she did not tell me what it was; and she asked me to pray for her. I can do that, if I can do nothing else. Show mercy, dear; remember the words, 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.'"

"What nonsense you talk, mother! I did show

mercy. I said to her, 'Come and be my wife, and I'll make you as grand as any duchess in the country. Never a word shall be heard of your brother's cheating and theft. I'll sent him out to New Zealand, and give him money to make a fresh start; and I'll make a grand lady of you.' What more could I do?"

"What if she did not love you, Albert? It is a dreadful thing to marry without love."

"Humbug! She would learn to love me. She should have gone to Court, and I'll bet her diamonds should have outdone those of all the duchesses in the whole lot. But what's the use of talking? Here, you may take that bit of paper, and do what you like with it. I don't want it; I hate the sight of it," and Mr. Hardman tossed the crumpled Bank of England note to his mother.

"What does it mean? Fifty pounds! A fifty pound note! What does it mean?"

"It means that she thought I cared for a trumpery fifty pounds, and paid it back. It's the sum her brother stole from me."

"Oh, how noble and good of her!" the old lady exclaimed. "Albert dear, I cannot bear to see you miserable and angry. Try to think kindly of the young lady, and do not nurse bad feelings against her."

"You know nothing about it, mother; how should you? It makes me mad to think I let her slip. I should have nailed her down to promise me what I asked for the day she was here; now it's too late. But I'll be too much for her yet. I never did fail to get what I wanted yet, and I don't mean to fail now. She *shall* marry me or repent it!" and then Mr. Hardman

stamped his heavy foot on the ground, and with some words not too refined or pleasant to the ear, he flung himself out of the room.

If a man like Mr. Hardman can be said to fall in love, he had certainly fallen in love with Stephanie. But now the love was mingled with bitterness and anger. He felt he had been, as he said, checkmated; that the prey had escaped from the snare he had laid for it; that his dream of a beautiful and high-born wife to grace his table, and excite the envy and admiration of his friends, was at an end.

There seemed nothing to be done. He would have set off in hot pursuit, but he had no clue, and nothing to guide him. He went out to a grand civic dinner, and came back heated with wine, and more restless and full of rage against Stephanie than ever, and yet through all loving her, as he understood that word.

And his mother sat, in her little quiet sitting-room, in the corner of that grand, gorgeous mansion, thinking over the days when she was a happy wife, in the pretty cottage surrounded with flowers. She recalled her boy's childhood, and how proud he was to handle a little spade and follow his father about in the garden, digging with all his might in imitation of his father, who would call her to admire their little son's strength and earnestness in what he was about. And then came the change—the gradual assertion of his will; his going off to London; then his father's death; his determination to make his way, as he said, and make his fortune.

He had made both, and what was the result? Alas! her son was now a hard man of the world, and the

only tender place left in his heart had seemed to be for her.

"I can only pray for him," the old mother thought; "pray that by some means, and in some way that our Lord sees best, he may be brought to the ways of peace and forgiveness by those whom he fancies have wronged him. And as for that beautiful girl who turned and kissed me so prettily, I will never forget to pray for her, and that she may be comforted and helped by our Father in heaven."

These simple prayers from a loving heart, shall they not be answered in God's time and way?

B O O K II.

“The gravity and stillness of your youth
The world hath noted.”—SHAKESPEARE.

CHAPTER VII.

FAR FROM THE WORLD.

AN August afternoon, when the heat of the summer day had moderated, and the air was cool and pleasant.

A group was collected on the close-shaven lawn before a fine old mansion of various styles of architecture, which commanded an extensive view of the moorland country, with its tors and craggy heights, to be seen with a beauty peculiarly its own in North Devon.

Far away from railways, and the bustle and noise of town life, the old house of the Grenvilles was seldom seen except by chance pedestrians, who found the isolated village of Westover in their way in a walk over the moors from Lustleigh or Manaton, villages which were twice as large as little Westover.

The owner of Combe Place—Sir John Grenville—was jealous of any encroachment on his estate. Thus no villas sprang up like mushrooms near Westover, and the little moorland village looked very much as it had looked a hundred years ago, with its old ivy-mantled church, round which the quiet God's-acre, shaded by cypresses, was the centre of a few houses

and cottages, where a few people lived, and often died, unnoticed and unknown to fame.

A coach passed that way twice a week, and now and then two or three tourists were dropped at the Grenville Arms in the village, an Inn in keeping with the place, surrounded by a garden which sloped upwards to the moor, whence a little stream came tumbling down, and ran through the village by the Inn, making the sweet music which mountain streams know so well how to sing as their clear brown waters dance merrily over the pebbles lying in their bed.

No one had been much inclined for exertion on that August day; but now there seemed a spirit stirring amongst the guests at Combe Place, as the breeze stirred in the topmost branches of the trees.

"What shall we do, Paul? Come, do wake up, and be agreeable."

The personage thus appealed to drew himself into a sitting position, and said:

"Do let me have a little peace; the 'always doing' of life seems to me to be misery."

"You lazy boy," was the rejoinder, as a long spike of grass was skilfully inserted between the collar of a tennis "blazer" and the mass of thick, dark curls which almost hid it.

Unlike the young men of the present day, Paul Grenville allowed his hair to grow as it listed, and in this respect he presented a strong contrast to two of his guests, who, with close-shaved heads, as smooth as the turf across which they moved, were handing about tea and cakes, while he had been lying, in a dream, on a rug spread on the grass.

"How can you let Herbert and Walter Mason wait upon everyone? Get up, Paul, at once!"

"I have got up," was the answer. "Here comes the master. Now for it."

As he spoke a strange figure appeared emerging from the door of the conservatory.

A gentleman, whose age it was difficult to decide, muffled with a large white comforter twisted round his neck, and a cloak hanging on his shoulders. Not a double Inverness cape of the fashion of to-day, but a single cloak of finest broadcloth, fastened by a heavy silver clasp beneath a brown velvet collar.

The master of all this fair inheritance looked strangely out of harmony with it, as he advanced towards the place where young men and maidens were chatting gaily as they sipped their afternoon tea. He might have come straight from Strawberry Hill, an intimate crony of Horace Walpole, if not Horace Walpole himself.

"Well, sir," he said, addressing his son, "you seem to be taking life easy, as usual."

"It is the wisest course, father; isn't it? There are bustle and worry enough in the world, I take it, without my adding to it."

"Sit down, dear Uncle John. This chair is so comfortable; and I will fetch a rug to put over your knees," said the same musical young voice which had addressed Paul a few minutes before.

"My dear, it is scarcely ever safe to sit out of doors in this detestable English climate. There is a touch of east in the wind;" and Sir John Grenville screwed up his eye and squinted at the vane on the

tower above the quadrangle behind the house. "No, I will stand, thank'ee kindly."

"Ah, Sir John!" exclaimed a portly lady who had been presiding at the tea-table, "shall I give you a cup of tea?"

"Not if I know it, my lady; unless I wish not to get a wink of sleep to-night."

"We are *so* enjoying ourselves," Lady Mason began. "My boys and girls are never so happy as when they are here. They are all going off to the tennis court, and I am afraid I must go to act propriety, you know. My girls are such splendid tennis players; I really hope they will get a good set. Bel is sure to win, so I must go and try to keep her opponents in a good temper. Are you coming, Rose? I don't ask Paul; I know he does not care for tennis."

Rose made no sign of assent, and Lady Mason, who with her sons and daughters was a guest at Combe Place, followed the retreating figures at what Paul called a heavy trot.

"How long is she going to stay? She has been here a month."

"No, no, Paul; only a fortnight," Rose corrected.

"Well, it seems like six months, and five people for a fortnight count fivefold. I do get so sick of her brag about Bel and Bee, and their eternal tennis, and their singing and fiddling. I am glad you don't sing or fiddle, Rose."

"You are very hard on the Masons, Paul. Come, let us go and punt about on the lake. I want to get some more lilies. Uncle John, we are going to the lake."

"Very well, my dear. Don't upset her, Paul."

"Uncle John, you don't think he rows or paddles with an oar. He is much too lazy," Rose said, laughing. "Why don't you come with us, Uncle John? Do come."

"No, my dear, thank you. I don't like the water. But I don't mind strolling down to the lake with you—part of the way at least."

Then the three moved away together, Rose laughing merrily as Sir John again squinted at the vane, drew his cloak round him, and said: "The east wind soon found out his weak place."

Rose Temple was the very perfection of an English maiden, a very rosebud of a girl—bright and joyous and sweet-tempered, with just a touch of wilfulness about her which increased her charm, without a shadow of pretension or silly conceit, and yet able to hold her own when it was right to do so without flinching.

Rose was the niece of Sir John's second wife. Paul the son of the first.

Sir John had remained unmarried for some years. Then a fair, gentle girl, who was left alone in the world, took his heart by storm, and he made her his wife. She brightened his life for two short years, and died when her son Paul was an infant.

Sir John then fell into the hands of one of those women who dole out sympathy and flattery in large doses, as a means to an end, and became Lady Grenville in less than a year after Paul's young mother had been laid to rest in the Grenville chapel in the little church at Westover.

She put her niece, the child of her only brother,

into the bargain; and Rose had known no other home than Combe Place. Rose was a little girl of four years old when Paul was still in his nurse's arms, for he was late in his efforts to walk, as he was late in everything else.

He hated trouble, and looked upon the active people of the world, like Lady Mason, as intolerable bores.

He was generally considered a doubtful addition to dinner parties, picnics, and the like; and yet how many hopes were centred on him!

Lady Mason, who established a right to a *pied-à-terre* at all seasons at Combe Place on the strength of a relationship to the second Lady Grenville, had always a great hope that at last Paul would give in and lay himself and his fortune at the feet of one of her daughters.

But as yet it was plainly to be seen by those who looked on, that neither Bel nor Bee had found the vulnerable place in Paul's heart.

Had any one found it? Had he ever taken the trouble to fall in love? Was there ever any hope that if he did take that trouble Bee or Bel might prove the *raison d'être*?

Lady Mason began to ask herself this question more anxiously as time went on, and a certain antagonistic feeling she had against Rose Temple rather grew and strengthened.

It was a little stronger than usual this afternoon, and showed itself by a tone of vexation on her part, as she sank down on one of the seats which were placed on the bank round the tennis court, and watched the players making up their sets.

Her two sons and a Miss Daniels and a little girl hardly out of the schoolroom, who was familiarly called Pussie Johnstone, were playing together; while the son of the clergyman of Westover and a big schoolboy, a brother of Pussie's, made up the other set with Bel and Bee Mason.

It was really too provoking that the heir of all these broad acres, and the future owner of this moorland paradise, should prefer to dawdle about in a boat on a little bit of water, called *par excellence* "The Lake," with a girl whom he saw every day, to the society of two girls like Bee and Bel; the one so intellectual and well read, the other an accomplished musician, whom Hallé and Neruda praised; and then their lawn tennis playing was unrivalled!

Lady Mason was, to use a common expression, "put out;" and the other guests, who were neighbours from the village—insignificant people, asked as a kindness—found her uncommunicative and moody.

They were therefore left to their own conversation with each other, discussing rather threadbare topics with which they were mutually familiar.

Mrs. Johnstone, a quiet and ladylike person, was listening to a long story of the delinquencies of servants, who had nearly worried the rector's wife into a fever. Mrs. Daniels was always in domestic difficulties, and distracted about the condition of her furniture, which suffered from the servants' carelessness. The names of the servants might change, but the complaints against them were always the same.

People as a rule got a little weary of these histories, but Mrs. Johnstone was a patient listener, who calmly

worked at a strip of embroidery, and only gave an ejaculation of sympathy or surprise as the case might be.

Lady Mason's near neighbourhood seemed to demand an attempt at least at conversation, and Mrs. Daniels moved a garden chair a little nearer the seat where Lady Mason was meditating on Paul's misdemeanour and want of taste, and said:

"Is not Mr. Grenville coming to play?"

"No; Mr. Grenville apparently prefers the boat."

Then Lady Mason opened an immense Japanese fan, and began to fan herself vigorously.

"Your daughters play tennis very well, Lady Mason."

"Oh, yes! they are quite distinguished in our own neighbourhood. Here, indeed, there are no players at all competent to challenge them. Bel is a most graceful player. Look how awkwardly Miss Daniels moves, and that tall boy is quite ridiculous. Poor Bel! I pity her with such a partner. That little girl of yours jumps about too much. Of course she is only a child; not 'out' yet, I suppose."

"Bessie Johnstone is seventeen. She is not *my* daughter, Lady Mason."

"Oh, yes, I forgot! I get a little mixed with people whom I don't know intimately. I see, of course, your daughter is the tall girl; it is a pity she cannot run, for she takes the ball fairly well. Ah! look at that ball of Bel's. Splendid!" and Lady Mason put down the big parasol and clapped her hands.

Lady Mason, like many mothers, thought all her geese were swans, but she was rather exceptional in her outspoken praises of them. Her friends were a little tired of hearing their perfections rehearsed in their

ears, and some even went so far as to dissent from the opinion which was so dogmatically expressed.

Mrs. Johnstone had listened to the remarks on the tennis with some amusement. They did not ruffle her serenity as they ruffled Mrs. Daniels, who pruned her feathers, if I may be allowed to use the expression, and stood on the defensive.

"Alicia is understood to be a remarkably good tennis player," she said, "in this neighbourhood."

"Ah! yes, of course. She has no chance of very good practice here. Except for Combe Place, it seems to me, the society in these parts is confined to moorland farmers, scattered at wide intervals."

Mrs. Daniels inwardly wondered why Lady Mason was so certain to appear with her sons and daughters every year, if she found the neighbourhood so dull.

"I really suppose Sir John's nearest neighbours are ten or twelve miles off, except, of course, chance-folk, who come with troops of wild children to the farm-house in the summer. It is a pity dear Sir John is so averse to society; but we shall see a change when Paul rouses himself, if he ever does rouse himself."

Mrs. Daniels was not at all soothed by these remarks. Naturally, she felt that the rectory was within a mile of the lower lodge gates, and, therefore, the strictures as to neighbours were not very polite. Mrs. Johnstone's quiet smile told that she also had heard the sweeping assertion, which was followed by another burst of maternal exultation, as Bee and Bel came up, saying:

"An easy victory."

"Yes," said Bel, throwing herself down in the depths

of one of the canvas chairs. "Yes, it is frightfully dull to play sets like these."

"You had better have a game with your brother, my dear child."

"Ah! I don't know; I'm tired. Where is Rose?"

"Gone off to the lake with Paul."

"Not very courteous, I must say."

And now Pussie came up, laughing merrily.

"Oh, we've had such a delightful game, mother! It teaches me so much to play with Mr. Mason, and he is so kind, and does not grumble when I miss a ball." The two young men, and Percy Johnstone and Mr. Daniels' boy, now came up, and took up their positions on the turf, while Bee turned away towards the house.

"What's up with Bee?" Walter Mason said. "She looks as cross as two sticks."

"Walter!" exclaimed his mother in a reproving voice.

"Bee has gone to finish the article in the *Nineteenth Century*," Bel said, "and I must go and practise."

"Rubbish," said her brother; "why don't you play another game?"

But Bel turned loftily away, and walked with what she believed to be great dignity towards the house. Then Herbert Mason said:

"Come, Miss Johnstone and Miss Daniels, are you ready for another game? And as for your brothers, I am afraid they must have 'a single,' as my sisters have 'cut up rough.'"

"Herbert, do *not* use slang here, please," Lady Mason said. "I object to it."

Lady Mason's brow was dark, and she began to

think that unless things went more pleasantly in the next day or two, she should shorten her visit. Fortunately, however, a man now appeared with a card on a salver.

"I thought Miss Temple was here, your ladyship," the servant said, addressing Lady Mason.

"No; but let me see," Lady Mason said, hastily fixing her glasses on her nose.

"Oh," she said, rising, "I will come in; it is Lady Camberwell. I am sure you will excuse me," she said, turning to Mrs. Johnstone and Mrs. Daniels. "If Rose is not at her post I must fill it for her," and Lady Mason bustled away full of importance, and hoping that Lady Camberwell might have called on her ready primed with an invitation to Tor Castle. For Lady Camberwell was one of the desirable neighbours ten miles distant of whom Lady Mason had spoken.

Paul Grenville's favourite resort was the little lake where the water-lilies grew. It suited his temperament to lie back in the boat, and take an oar or not as he felt inclined. The lake was a little mere fed by mountain springs in a very secluded position. It was shut in on the north side by the wooded slopes and rising ground which swept round toward the back of the house, and protected it so well from cold blasts, that many flowery shrubs and plants flourished in the gardens of Combe Place even in the winter, which faded and withered on the higher level beyond.

A path, called always "the green path," was cut through the plantation of firs and beeches, and was entered by a gate close to the sloping beach by the lake. On the opposite side was the boat-house, and behind it a high bank of rhododendrons, in the early

days of summer a blaze of beautiful colours—pale mauve, rich purple, deep red, and delicate amber.

The plantation was the home of numberless rabbits, and advancing footsteps always disturbed some hundreds of them, as they came out to feed on the short strip of turf which edged the lake, and scuttled off with their white-lined tails erect at the sound of footsteps.

As Rose was unmooring the boat, and Paul was, as he would have expressed it, "lending a hand," there was a decided excitement amongst the rabbits, and a race towards the plantation, where the whole company disappeared.

Sir John Grenville was not the man to have his territory invaded. He held firmly to old traditions, and would no more have thought of permitting the common herd to enter within the charmed precincts of Combe Place, than the Emperor of China would think of permitting free ingress to his palace. Once indeed, so it was said, Sir John had allowed the family of his man of business to have a picnic by the lake; but a ginger-beer bottle and a paper bag, and the still more terrible sight of orange peel, gave him such a nervous shock the next morning, that no more picnics were ever permitted in that sacred place.

Boards, on which were painted in large letters "Private Grounds," were placed in various directions; and bold indeed must have been the person who dared to pass into the plantation from the Westover road, and tread the soft carpet of mossy turf, which made the sound of coming feet on the green path all but noiseless, except indeed in the sharp ears of the rabbits.

Just as the boat was pulling out from the boat-

house, and Sir John, who had accompanied his son and Rose to the bank of the lake, was about to retrace his steps towards the gardens, the excitement amongst the little brown colony made him pause and look round.

There, at the white gate, with her hand upon the latch, stood a lady, tall and stately, with an expression on her face—half amazement, half vexation.

The boat moved slowly across the lake, and Sir John walked as slowly round the bank, till he was within ear-shot of the intruder.

Evidently she was determined to rally her forces, and lifting the latch, upon which her hand had been resting in some uncertainty, she let the gate swing behind her, and came forward to Sir John.

"Your servant, madam," was his greeting, with his large hat in his hand, making a low bow; "your servant, madam."

"I am very sorry; I am afraid I am trespassing," the lady said, in tones so clear and ringing, though musical and sweet, that they reached those in the boat.

"I am afraid I am trespassing," the lady repeated. "I came in at a gate which leads into the road."

"It is of no consequence, madam; not of the slightest consequence. 'Private grounds' is printed on a board over that gate. Perhaps you could not read the words. The print is clear enough, I think; but it is of no consequence."

"I really beg your pardon. I ought to have seen the board; I mean, I ought to have paid proper attention to it. I did see it, and the words printed on it; only, I thought, as the gate was open, I would come in. It looked so tempting, so delightful."

"Yes, it is a pretty place—Combe Place; the lie of the grounds is much admired. Pray, do not apologise; but if you proceed further, and enter the house, may I beg you not to ascend the staircase, nor enter the bedrooms?"

"I do not wish to come any further," was the reply. "I am sorry I came so far. If you forbid me to proceed, I must turn back; if you forbid me to turn back, I must stay here, and take up my abode in the boat-house!"

The satirical tone, almost equal to his own, made Sir John wonder a little, and he replied:

"By no means, madam," in the same strain. "The boat-house is scarcely suited to the requirements of a lady. Your taste for exploration is highly commendable; only another time kindly exclude the grounds of Sir John Grenville, of Combe Place, from your scrutiny. Good morning, madam; I wish you good-day."

Sir John departed, after a bow lower than any which had preceded it.

Then the ripple of the water against the side of the little boat grew more distinct, and in another moment Paul and Rose Temple had brought it alongside the bank, just below where the intruder stood.

She watched Sir John's retreating figure with an amused smile, which triumphed over vexation, and then she turned towards the boat.

The bank was high, and as she stood there above the boat, and looked down on those in it, they looked up at her.

Paul had risen, and, taking off his wide straw hat, he said:

"I hope you will excuse any seeming discourtesy on

my father's part. He is an old man, and has passed a long life in the seclusion of his own home, and is somewhat tenacious of its rights and privileges."

"Yes," was the reply. "It is very evident I am in the wrong place, Will you help me to get into the right one? Am I to stay here, or go back the way I came? I found the gate open."

"That was carelessness on the part of one of the keepers," Paul said.

"If you will allow me, I will come with you and show you the way, for it is more than likely that the gate is locked by this time; and then you can row back, Rose," he said; and Rose, thinking she had never seen Paul so disposed to take so much trouble for anyone before, obeyed him.

Almost at the same moment as the boat touched the boat-house a servant appeared.

"Lady Mason has sent me, Miss Temple, to say that Lady Camberwell is in the drawing-room, and wants to see you."

"What a bother!" Rose exclaimed *sotto voce*. Then aloud to the servant:

"I will come in a few minutes, James."

Rose helped Paul to moor the boat, and sprang out, but he was before her, and had reached the place where the lady was standing.

"If you will allow me," he said, "I will take you through the plantations, or," he added, with a little hesitation, "through the grounds to the principal entrance."

"No," the lady said with a smile. "I do not think I dare face the lion in the way for a second time; he

might think I wanted to go into the bedrooms, you know! I am sure your sister will agree with me."

"Rose knows my father as well as I do," Paul said, "perhaps better, and she will tell you he assumes that air of——"

"Mocking courtesy," was the quick rejoinder.

"Yes, if you like that term," Paul said, a little thrown back by the calm self-possession of the trespasser.

They had reached the gate now, and Rose, with a smile and "good-bye" pleasantly spoken, hurried away towards the house, while Paul held the gate open to let the lady pass, following her and letting it shut behind him.

The cool vista stretched before them; the mossy turf was soft and elastic beneath their feet. The murmur of the wood-pigeons made a gentle monotonous melody that harmonised with the tinkle of a stream, running through a deep channel in the wood to join the lake below.

As Paul walked by his companion's side neither spoke; the calm of the place seemed to act as a spell neither cared to break. Once or twice Paul glanced at the trespasser, and her profile was seen to great advantage in its frame of a small straw bonnet, tied under the rounded chin with a black velvet bow.

The bonnet, like everything else about her, was perfectly plain, but nothing could have suited her lithe supple figure better than the tight-fitting dress, of soft black cashmere, which was finished at the throat and wrists by a narrow edge of white ribbon.

Amongst the many thoughts and speculations which passed through Paul's mind during that silent walk the foremost was naturally, "Who is she?"

Then, "How beautiful she is! I can fancy her in a train of velvet, and diamonds flashing in her hair. I wish she would turn her head; her profile is clearly cut, but her eyes are hidden from me. Such hair too—indescribable in colour! I can't even give it a name. It was red-gold just now in the sunshine, and now it is like the colour of a chestnut, the bit that shines out when the husk cracks."

These meditations occupied Paul till they reached the gate leading into the Westover Road, and above it the board on which very unmistakably "Private Grounds" was printed.

Paul was about to open the gate, when it became evident that the keeper, who had been so careless, had discovered his forgetfulness, and had returned to lock it.

"How tiresome!" Paul exclaimed. "I am really very sorry. I have not my pass-key in my pocket. I never *do* have it when I want it," he said impatiently. "But the keeper's cottage is not far off. If you will kindly wait here, I will find him and get a key. Will you wait here, or come with me?"

"I shall rather enjoy a longer walk through these lovely woods, so I shall be glad to come with you. I am giving you a great deal of trouble."

"Trouble is a pleasure in this instance," Paul said.

Then the eyes he had been wishing to see were turned upon him, and a smile passed over her face.

"Trouble is not often a pleasure to you?"

"Perhaps not; but circumstances alter cases." Then after a pause, "Why do you put me down as lazy?"

"I can read fairly well by the light of circumstances. You did not take the lion's share of the trouble in

getting the boat on the lake, and you left the rowing to your sister. I confess I was watching you from the gate before I opened it. Perhaps I had no right to do so. I can only say that having taken one wrong step as a trespasser, I was tempted to take a second, and became a spy. You must have a very bad opinion of me."

Paul murmured something intended to be a flattering disclaimer of any such opinion, but he did not make himself intelligible.

"Are you staying in this neighbourhood?" he asked.

"I am living in Westover," was the reply.

"In Westover?"

The tone expressed surprise, and she repeated, "Yes, in Westover. The village is not in private grounds, is it?"

CHAPTER VIII.

LAUREL COTTAGE.

PAUL went over in his mind the probable house where such a beautiful lady could be a guest. The rectory was unlikely; besides the inhabitants of the rectory were at that moment in the tennis court at Combe Place. Mrs. Johnstone's house on the edge of the moor was equally unlikely, and the doctor's scarcely less so. The gabled houses of several well-to-do farmers passed before him as possible, but were finally rejected. There was no one left but Mr. Watson, his father's steward and bailiff, whose pretty house was just within the park gates on the farther side of the estate. Could it be possible that the lady was a relation of Mrs. Watson, who was a person of good family.

With a curiously instinctive power the lady seemed to read Paul's thoughts, for she said:

"I am living in the village of Westover, as I told you, with my mother. We like the country, especially a lovely country like this, and wish for retirement. So we have determined to take up our abode here for a time."

"I—I cannot remember any house in the village where you might be fairly comfortable."

"Our cottage has a name," was the reply, "but evidently no fame. It stands in a little garden beyond

the church, unseen from the high road, and it is called 'Laurel Cottage.' Now you must confess that is a fine-sounding name, suggestive of crowns and success."

Was she laughing at him? he wondered, or was she in sober earnest?

They were at the keeper's cottage now, a pretty house with painted gables, and covered with honeysuckle and monthly roses, which the westering sunshine was lighting with a warm glow.

"Laurel Cottage is not so pretty as this," she said; "your keeper is a fortunate man to live in it."

"Macdonald!" Paul called in a peremptory tone, "the key of the lower gate; make haste, Macdonald."

The keeper, a fine stalwart man, in a brown velvet coat and knee breeches, came into the porch with his mouthful of bread and butter, for he was at tea with his wife.

"The key, Macdonald; you left the gate unlocked, and——"

"Begging your pardon, sir. I certainly did *not* leave the gate unlocked; it was that young rascal, Burton. I knew better than to give tramps a chance of the plantations at this time of year. Has any one got in, sir, unawares? There's always a lot of vagrants about, prying and peering where they've no business."

"I am the vagrant," the lady said with a smile, "I am the vagrant and trespasser. You will not think, I hope, that I had any design on the pheasants."

"Dear bless me, madam," said the keeper, "such a thought never entered my head. I am only sorry Mr. Grenville has had any trouble about it. But young

Burton shall have a piece of my mind. A taste of my stick would not hurt him, as I've said to Mr. Watson a dozen times. He ain't worth his salt, let alone his wages, as an underkeeper."

"I see your dog trusts me. Dear, good old fellow," the lady exclaimed, as a grim old boarhound, sitting erect on his haunches, answered the touch of that soft white hand by laying his head against the lady's arm, and gazing up into her face with that look of perfect confidence which dogs have in such a remarkable degree. When their eyes tell the tale of trust and loyalty, they have a beauty peculiar to themselves which is almost human.

"It would be a queer animal, whether on two legs or four, who did not trust her," was the keeper's soliloquy, as he watched the two figures passing from the sunlight into the shadow of the wood beyond.

At the gate Paul paused.

"My father introduced himself to you as Sir John Grenville. May I hope that you will in return tell me to whom I am indebted for this pleasant afternoon?"

"Now that is a very pretty speech to make to a vagrant and a trespasser, Mr. Grenville, but I cannot quite endorse it as true! I should have judged you, even before you spoke to me, as a person who hated trouble, and surely I have given you plenty."

Paul was beginning to disclaim the idea of trouble rather irritably, when she stopped him.

"No, do not say any more. And as to my name, if you wish to give me one, you may call me Miss Ling; and now good-bye, Mr. Grenville." She gave the gate

a little push as she said this, and passing through, was in the road, walking swiftly away, before Paul could recover himself.

"Miss Ling!" he exclaimed, "Miss Ling! What a name for her! The most beautiful woman I ever saw! It is impossible to think of her as Miss Ling. It is like calling a rose a dandelion." Then the gate was shut with a sharp, impatient click, the key thrust into his pocket, and, baffled and disappointed, Paul retraced his steps. As he came in sight of the house, Rose ran gaily towards him.

"Well, Paul, what have you done with her?"

"Done with her? Let her out of the gate into the road, of course."

"Isn't she very pretty?" Rose asked.

"Pretty!" repeated Paul wrathfully. "'Pretty' is quite the wrong adjective."

"Is it?" Rose said. "Well, I will change it to beautiful then, if you like it better. Have you found out her name?"

Paul shrugged his shoulders.

"She gave me a name," he said; "but it does not sound like her real name."

"Oh! do tell me, Paul; do tell me," Rose exclaimed.

But instead of answering the question Paul went on: "It was very unfortunate that my father should have been so awfully rude to her. I never felt more ashamed of anyone in my life."

"It is only Uncle John's way," pleaded Rose. "I believe he was just as much fascinated with the trespassing lady as you are. I heard him telling Lady

Mason he could fancy she might be Petrarch's *Laura* or Madame de Stael's *Corinne*."

Poor Paul! The clear voice in which the mysterious stranger had answered his question rang in his ear.

"Call me Miss Ling." Ling! a name that could not be associated with any one of distinction.

There were Honourable Mrs. Jones and Lady Jones everywhere. Jones was a good old Welsh name, better than Halls or Smith, except that Smythe looks well in print. But Ling! There was a common ring in it. Miss Ling!

While Paul was thus vexing himself about the name of the fair incognita, Rose was telling him of Lady Camberwell's visit, and begging him to take care to be very agreeable at dinner, for Lady Mason was certainly put out with him, and Mrs. Daniels had resented something that had been said about her daughter Ethel, and Bel and Bee were very snappish and contradictory, and altogether things were not going very smoothly. Paul must really do his best to conciliate the mother by paying attention to the daughters.

Paul answered in an absent way, "All right."

But Rose had great fears that "all was wrong," and that the dinner would not be seasoned with that salt of life which alone can make a meal pleasant.

Paul Grenville's natural disposition was lazy and indolent. There was no necessity for exertion, and he knew it. He read a great deal for his own pleasure, and he had floated through Oxford, spending, it is true, goodly sums on the voyage, but making no shipwreck on the sunken rocks which may be said to abound in the universities for young men of fortune, even more

decidedly than for those who have to limit their expenditure by their means.

There was nothing to complain of in his career up to the present time.

Paul was heir to a large fortune and a mansion which was the delight of those who love the old rather than the new, and to whom staring palace-like houses or imitation Elizabethan erections are an offence and a vexation.

The steward, Mr. Watson, had managed Sir John's affairs so well, that when Paul attained his majority, two years before this time, the condition of the Combe Place estates surprised and satisfied everyone concerned. Sir John denied his son nothing; and if he were sometimes annoyed at Paul's easy-going temperament, he did not often show his annoyance.

A few sharp speeches, and a little keen satire, was the worst Paul had to expect, and Sir John looked round on the young men of the day, like Herbert and Walter Mason, and was fairly satisfied with the son of his old age.

Sir John had a masculine dimness of vision, and he was wholly unconscious of Lady Mason's plots, and of the web she was weaving in the hope of catching a prize.

Lady Mason was clever and useful in entertaining guests, and, as far as Sir John was concerned, the presence of Bee and Bel, and their brothers, did not concern him.

They all looked well as they sat around his well-appointed table, and it was just as well that once a year, what neighbours there were, should be entertained by Paul at Combe Place.

Sir John had not married until he had touched his fifth decade, and did not trouble himself as to his son's matrimonial future. The boy would fall in love in due course, when the right person came in his way, and what with his title—for Sir John was the fifth baronet, and no mushroom erection of yesterday—and what with his fine place, and finer fortune, Paul might take his pick in any field where he chose to look for a fair flower to grace Combe Place.

Lady Mason was, as Rose had given Paul to understand, "out of sorts," and she showed it by jerking a question across at him in a voice which arrested the attention of the people who were seated on either side of the beautifully-ornamented dinner-table.

"Did you find out the name of that young person, Paul, whom I hear was caught trespassing this afternoon, and behaved with such astonishing impertinence?"

There was no answer, and Paul preferred to be languidly unconscious that Lady Mason had addressed the question to him. But an old gentleman, a neighbour who owned a small property three or four miles from Combe Place, who had hitherto been too much engaged with doing justice to his dinner to enter into conversation with anyone, had caught the word trespassing!

"Trespassing! How impudent people are! Upon my word, Sir John, if you don't take care you'll have your place turned into a tea garden. They have taken to advertise cheap trains to Westover Junction, and we shall have the whole neighbourhood infested."

"Yes," chimed in Lady Mason; "it is extraordinary

how difficult it is to keep out impertinent people. I find it so, I assure you. No gate seems to be a barrier."

Lady Mason's villa in the neighbourhood of Leamington did not give much scope to intruders. An errand boy snatching a bit of lilac or laburnum for his cap, or a white pink for his buttonhole, was the head and front of the offences against which she inveighed so emphatically.

The old gentleman, however, was started on his hobby, and did not take that into account, and he and Lady Mason vied with each other in abusing the vulgar herd who came where they were not wanted, and deplored the frightful increase of democratical principles.

"In time, upon my word, we shall have every barrier broken down. They want to get rid of the House of Lords, and there will be no such thing as respect or veneration left."

"No, indeed; and they have much to answer for," Lady Mason said, "who take people out of their proper sphere."

"It's our education, madam; it's our education that is doing the mischief. Why are not people content to let well alone? My father had a respectable and valued servant who could only sign his name by a cross and keep accounts by little bags—so much in one, so much in another. Never a mistake, never an error; not a bottle of wine from the cellar not accounted for. And now butlers are fine gentlemen, and maids dressed up like duchesses. I have no patience with it."

All this time Lady Mason's question had remained unanswered. She returned to the charge after the skirmish had subsided, and the servants, who had

evidently been amused by the old gentleman's observations, had withdrawn.

"And so after all you did not find out who the trespasser was, Paul? Now really you showed very little laudable curiosity by Sir John's account, and Rose's also. She seemed to be rather exceptional in appearance."

"Yes," said Sir John, speaking for the first time. "Yes, the lady looked to me like someone come out of the past rather than the present. If we must give her a name we will call her Laura or Laurentia, eh, Paul? Laurentia sounds well, I confess," said Sir John, leaning back in his chair, and fingering his glass of port before raising it to his lips. "I confess the trespasser had the bearing of a gentlewoman; cool, very cool. I doubt if any one could put her in a flurry. Well, we will call her Laurentia; and if the fashion of fifty years ago is no offence, I would say, Let us drink to the health of Laurentia, eh, Paul?"

"The name suits her well enough, father, for she lives at Laurel Cottage," Paul said, inwardly chafing under the knowledge that Petrarch's *Laura* or Madame de Stael's *Corinne* was simply Miss Ling?

The subject of so much speculation reached Laurel Cottage about six o'clock, and found her mother much distressed by her long absence.

"Oh, my dear, I have been so anxious! Has anything happened, Stephanie?"

"No, dear mother, except that I was caught trespassing in the grounds of Combe Place. We are too near Combe Place. I did not take in that a grand

house was so near us. I am afraid we shall have to take up our tent again and move on."

"Oh, Stephanie, I cannot go on living this hunted life! It will kill me. Is it necessary? Must it be?"

A shadow as of sudden pain came over Stephanie's beautiful face as she bent over her mother, saying:

"It *must* be. I am so sorry to cause you trouble, mother. You know this retirement must last for the present."

"Unless you marry a man who could endow you with enormous wealth, and by doing so bring back to me my poor boy, my only son."

"Mother!" Stephanie said, clasping her hands, "I cannot do this thing. I will not. Nothing can change my resolution. Do not add to my pain by going over the old ground."

"I cannot help going over it," Mrs. Bolingbroke said fretfully. "I cannot help it. To think of you, with all your gifts, hiding away as if you had done something wrong; you who your poor father used to say had extraordinary intellectual powers; and how he cultivated them! Then there is Henry Lovelace, let me write to him. I am certain he would not steel his heart against us if he knew——"

"What could he do, mother? He is married and happy, and has forgotten us."

"He might go to Mr. Hardman, and ask him to forgive poor Aubrey. Oh, my poor boy! shall we never hear of him?"

"I have no doubt we shall in due time. Mr. Swifte will send on any news of him. It is really the best thing that could have happened to Aubrey; he is taken

away from temptation; he is safe for the present. Would that I could say he was innocent."

"He was sorely tempted, Stephanie; remember that, remember that."

"Tempted! No, mother, do not say a word in excuse. Tempted! Yes, to buy trinkets for a girl who does not care two straws for him. The hungry boy, who sees a cake at a baker's shop, is tempted if he steals it. The poor artisan, who has a wife and children crying for food, is tempted to put his hand into a safe and take money. I could find it in my heart to forgive such, but not Aubrey."

"You are always so hard on Aubrey, your only brother. Ah, Stephanie, if you are ever a mother you will know what I suffer."

"I pray God I may never know it," Stephanie said. "But let us not talk any more about it now; we are safe here for the present; if we are discovered we will move. In this out-of-the-way place we are, I hope, off the track; and, dearest mother, I will do all I can for you. We have enough for our needs. Your little income is secure; and while I can hold a pen, you shall not want for any comfort; we shall not starve."

"But Aubrey may starve."

"He need not. He is young, and can work. He has a fair share of ability, and he can always apply to Mr. Swifte if he is in dire need. Now here comes Mrs. Sampson with the tray. I am sure you must want your tea; and then I will tell you how I have spent the afternoon."

Mrs. Bolingbroke wiped her tears hastily away. She never liked the landlady to notice she was in trouble.

"Wouldn't it do you good to take a turn out of doors this beautiful evening? There is a nice little copse across the bridge. My Mary Jane will show you the way."

Mrs. Bolingbroke was herself again, and said with dignity:

"No, thank you, Mrs. Sampson. I am not equal to it. I find it suits me better to keep quiet. I find this window very pleasant."

"Yes, surely it is pleasant; and the monthly roses smell so sweet. Sampson takes great pride in his garden, and I am glad it amuses him, poor fellow; for he ain't fit for much more than to dawdle about and dig a few potatoes in the back place."

"It was an accident that injured your husband's health," Stephanie said, "was it not?" She had returned from the room upstairs, having smoothed her rolls of sunny hair, and laid aside her bonnet.

"Yes, Miss Ling, yes; he fell from a ladder at the Combe, when they were building the new stables, and he has never been right since. But, as I say, there's worse troubles than mine. Jim has always been a good husband and a good father, and we can just manage to get on by letting the rooms as we have let them to you, and I do laundry work; and I hope, Miss Ling, I shall have you for a lodger for many a long day," added Mrs. Sampson as she left the room.

Then Stephanie tried to amuse her mother with the story of that afternoon's adventures. She had great power of narration, and her mother soon became interested in all the descriptions which Stephanie gave.

Sir John's cloak and comforter, his old-fashioned

bows, his keen glances, the satire which lay beneath the request that if she went to the house she would be so good as not to go upstairs to the bedrooms!

"But the lake, the little mere on which you come so unexpectedly, is beautiful; and the prettiest girl I think I ever saw was in the boat. She was the impersonation of Tennyson's little English maiden—a rosebud indeed. I daresay there may be thorns, but of that I had no time to judge."

"How was she dressed?" Mrs. Bolingbroke asked.

"In white, with blue ribbons, and a shady straw hat, with a bunch of grass and daisies in it. She had the sweetest smile, and such pretty, graceful movements."

"And what was the young man like?"

Stephanie laughed.

"It is harder to describe him; he poses as a poet, I think, with longish hair, you know, and one felt that the world and he were on good terms. Still, he is very good-looking—handsome, I suppose, is the right word."

"I wonder if we shall ever see any more of them?" Mrs. Bolingbroke said.

"I hope not, for it will not do to see much of anyone."

"The Daniels are disposed to be friendly, Stephanie. I thought you were very chilling to Miss Daniels yesterday."

"Mother, it is no use our coming to Westover if we are to know everyone. It may lead to unpleasant discoveries. I like Mr. and Mrs. Daniels well enough, and Mrs. Johnstone too, but we must not encourage people to run in and out. It is better not."

"Did this young man or the old gentleman ask who you were?"

"The young one did. I always feel uneasy about our name; and yet Ling is a part of our name. Bolingbroke would tell its story at once, and I dare not use it yet."

Mrs. Bolingbroke said:

"Yes, it is one of the oldest family names in England; it seems hard to turn it into a common ordinary one. However, I never can contest a point with you, Stephanie, you have always the best of it, or think you have."

"Be patient with me, mother. This retirement need not always be necessary. Mr. Hardman will forget us in time; it is so easy to forget, as we have proved. Nothing lasts very long; pain and grief, and joy and happiness, are all transient. If, as I hope, Aubrey does well, he may be able to come back, and, indeed, as the money is paid to Mr. Hardman there is no reason why he should not do so."

"Paid! Who paid the money?"

"I did," said Stephanie quietly, "and no more need be said about it."

"Oh, why did you not tell me before, Stephanie? It was quite unnecessary for Aubrey to go."

"It was quite necessary, mother; he could have got nothing to do in England with a damaged reputation. No one would have taken him as a clerk without a reference."

"Mr. Swifte would have taken him."

"No, he would not have done so; and besides, there was his infatuation for Maude Lyfton. She has

proved what she is by her letter to me. You surely do not wish for her for a daughter-in-law."

"No, she is very low and vulgar; no, I don't want to see any more of her."

"Then, dear mother, try to be trustful that I have done for the best, and whatever happens let us try to recognize God's hand in it. Of late"—Stephanie's lips trembled; for it is always hard to speak of the most sacred things to those who are nearest to us—"Of late, dear mother," she went on, "I have been brought to feel God is very near me in my trouble, and the greatest comfort I have is to go to Him for guidance and strength to do what is right—what I know is right. I could never have got through those dreadful three days, and our coming here, not knowing where I was taking you, if it had not been for this staff on which to lean. I am not afraid," she said, her beautiful eyes kindling with a light that seemed to illuminate her whole countenance. "I am not afraid, and if you will try to be happy and patient with me, I shall be able to go on with my work with my pen and my brush."

Mrs. Bolingbroke's response was rather faint, but as Stephanie bent down to kiss her she murmured:

"You were made for better things than a poor, humble life in a cottage like this."

"I was made for whatever life God has appointed for me, mother. We do not come to any place by accident, and this thought braces me for exertion in the present, and gives me hope for the future."

Stephanie always got through a great deal of work after her mother had gone to bed.

On this lovely night she drew aside the little muslin

curtain which hung across the lattice window, and looked out into the garden. The host of heaven was shining with wonderful brilliancy, and every now and then the silent and mysterious track of a falling star made a line of light across the deep dark blue of the sky. The scent of the flowers—the tall roses, lavender, and rosemary of the cottage garden—came in at the casement with delicious fragrance; and the babble of one of the little moorland rivulets made the only sound that broke the stillness, except a rustle in the tall myrtles and climbing rose which grew against the house, as a bird stirred in the branches.

Stephanie felt the calm of all around her like a message of peace. The wonderful thought that He who called all those stars by their names, and who guided the flight through space of the winged messengers which come athwart the sky noiselessly and swiftly, cares for every human soul in this little world of ours, came to her in her loneliness with a sweetness like the scent of the flowers as it rose on the breeze of the summer night.

Stephanie had read many of the books of the day which try to undermine faith, and take away every prop which the authors are pleased to call "old tradition," and give nothing in their place. A barren, unsatisfied sense of nothingness is the outcome of such teaching, and before these multiplied sorrows and trials had fallen on Stephanie she had felt this dull, cold uncertainty as to life and its mysteries which falls, alas! on many of the young and old in these days like a chilling pall. It is all very well to speak of effort for good and of sacrifice of self, of determination to raise

the fallen by culture and refinement, to put aside all thoughts of a revealed religion and follow the dictates of natural inclination towards high aims and high attainments, resulting in the reformation of the great seething mass of humanity. The literature of to-day teems with doctrines like this, more favourably put and more attractively set forth than I can even attempt to indicate. It was unlikely that a woman of Stephanie's intellectual tastes, living with parents who looked upon all religion as a form to be observed, as a matter of social ethics to fulfil the demands of respectable society, could fail to be affected in some degree by the influence of such literature.

A letter which she wrote in the night, after she had closed the window, and sat down to her writing-table, may tell her history since she had left Victoria Villa, Herne Hill, in a few words.

It was posted the next day, and received at Torquay by the friends who had been the great counter influence which had deeply affected her, and by God's grace given her the strength and sweetness which is seen at its best and highest in the character of a Christian gentlewoman; as opposed to that of one who, however gifted and however cultivated, ignores the faith of Christ which has made this sad world rejoice for many centuries, and turned the desert into water-springs, and made the thorny wilderness to blossom as the rose.

"A letter from Stephanie at last," Mr. Middleton said, as he went into his wife's room with his morning greeting.

"Oh, I am so glad!" was the reply. "Read it to me, Edward."

"I am afraid I must leave you to read it for yourself; for I have to meet the rector at Wickford. Don't get up early," was the parting admonition. "I shall be able to take you for a row this afternoon, and you must keep quiet till then."

A bright smile was the reply, and then Mrs. Middleton opened and read:

"LAUREL COTTAGE, WESTOVER, DARTMOOR,
"August 10th, ——.

"MY DEAR FRIENDS,—I received your welcome letter from Mr. Swifte, and I waited to write till I could tell you that mother and I are really settled in a pretty cottage, in a village some miles from a railway, and far, far away from a town.

"When we started from Paddington on that sad night, I felt as if I were cutting myself off from all past ties, and going forth, not knowing whither I went. After two or three attempts in places which were not suitable, and too near the centres of towns, I thought of the Devonshire moors. We went from Newton Abbot to Lustleigh, and then by coach through Manaton to Westover Junction. Here I asked the leisurely porter, who seemed to have very little to do, if he thought I could get country lodgings at Westover. He directed me to this very place—Laurel Cottage, kept by a relation of his—Mrs. Sampson. It all seemed pointed out for me. And we came here by a large, heavy omnibus, which performs the journey three times a week from the station to Westover. If there is an overflow of

visitors, the conveyance is got out of the stable yard at the 'Crown,' and for an extra fare passengers are taken to Westover: a rare occurrence.

"Our day happened to be one of the right days, and I got all our packages stowed away in the cumbrous old vehicle, and off we jolted.

"Mother was nearly shaken to pieces, but she bore it very well. Indeed, she does bear everything wonderfully. You cannot tell how deep the pain is when I remember that I am really the cause of this, and that it seems to her strange that I prefer anything rather than bondage, which, had I accepted those proposals, would have been lifelong. An ignoble bondage it would have been, and I thank God I am delivered from it. I feel free, and almost happy, the relief is so great to be, as I hope, out of his reach, and to feel also that I have paid the debt, and that he cannot have any claim on me or on poor Aubrey.

"There are times, of course, when mother mourns for Aubrey, and says she cannot understand why I was so anxious to get him out of the country. But you understand. He is out of the way of temptation, and in a place where the stain on his character is not known. I think he may even become a really respectable and good man. If ever that day comes I shall be rewarded indeed.

"I had a letter from Maude Lyfton, which showed pretty plainly that she was by no means sorry to find Aubrey was gone. It was a disagreeable and unworthy sort of letter. I burned it, and there is an end of it.

"On clear days, from one of the tors which stand up on the moors, I can see Torbay—the same blue sea

on which you are looking, and I like to feel I am near you.

"The country about here is wild and beautiful. I did not know till to-day that we were near a very large estate belonging to Sir John Grenville. I unfortunately trespassed this afternoon by going into a plantation by a gate which had been left ajar. I was treated as a vagrant, and the old gentleman, who looked as if he had stepped out of a picture by Sir Joshua Reynolds, spoke to me with a cutting sarcasm, which did not utterly overwhelm me, as he expected. Combe Place is, however, too near. Although the country is so thinly populated, there is a sprinkling of neighbouring gentry, and of course they will be sometimes at Sir John Grenville's. Mrs. Sampson, my nice landlady, says that Sir John leads a retired sort of life, except in the summer, and the shooting season, and so, I hope, we shall be left unnoticed. If there is any danger of our being known, we must move again; for mother's sake I hope it will not be necessary.

"The clergyman and his wife, and a Mrs. Johnstone, a widow, with a boy and girl, have called on us.

"I had to put on my stiffest air, for I do not wish for any intimacy.

"Our name humbles me a little. It is a part of our name; but I hate anything like deceit. I forgot to say, that old Sir John's son escorted me out of the plantation, and was very civil. He asked me my name, and I said, 'Call me Miss Ling.' I feel this to be a subterfuge, but it is surely excusable. There is a beautiful little mere or lake in Sir John's grounds, and I found myself on its bank all unawares. In a boat, amongst

the water-lilies, was the son of Sir John, rowed by a lovely girl—one of the loveliest I ever saw. She called him Paul, and I think she was his sister.

“My days are so full, I have no time to feel depressed, and I am making way with my new book. I had fifteen guineas yesterday for the article in the July *Decade*. Then I have taken to sketch, and I think I have more talent that way than I knew I had before.

“I go out early on the moor, and brush the dew from the little yellow cistus and daisies, and see the early sunshine, making the heather glow like one great imperial robe over the long stretch of moorland.

“It *is* beautiful. I take my prayer-book with me, and have a dear little nook formed by two big boulders, which I call my chapel. I read the psalms and lessons for the day there, and think of you, who first taught me to love the Word of God, and, I hope, yes, I do hope, I hear His voice, and that He draws near to me. My out-of-door life, of course, will end with the summer, in great measure; but I am getting quite used to one sitting-room, and mother is quiet and contented, and I write a good deal when she is in bed, as I am doing to-night.

“I have said enough to show you that I am wonderfully helped, and I feel I can never love and thank you both as I want, for all you have done for me. In a few short weeks I tasted the sweetness of friendship like yours, and though we are separated life is become different for me since I knew you.

“I hope I shall soon have good news of you, dearest Daisy, and I can imagine you getting better as the soft sea air blows over Torbay. It must be good after the

dusty road, and the want of air of Victoria Villas. Yet through all I think kindly of Victoria Villas; and that day when you met me at the gate, and took me in a stranger and comforted me, will be a red letter day in my calendar for ever. It was the beginning of a new chapter in my life, and on it is written the love and gratitude of your affectionate

“STEPHANIE.”

Mrs. Middleton read that letter again and again, and when her husband returned she said:

“Is it not a delightful letter?”

“Yes, it is very natural and unaffected, but I am afraid trouble may come from Combe Place. The hero of the boat will never let her hide in peace; you will see in the next letter we shall hear that the time is come to move again.”

“Oh, I hope not! I do hope not! I can fancy her enjoying the freedom of the moors, and making her little chapel in the tors. I really think Stephanie is tasting the sweets of self-sacrifice as very few people are allowed to taste it.”

“Yes, there is a restful tone in the letter,” Mr. Middleton said, “or rather a tone of satisfied labour, which is better. There is no weariness, and no tired ring throughout. Long may it be so. She is a noble woman, and it was a happy day for her when you took her in, as she expresses it so well, ‘a stranger, and comforted her.’”

CHAPTER IX.

GUESTS UNBIDDEN.

THE day but one after Stephanie's trespass on Sir John Grenville's territory Paul found his way to Laurel Cottage. He had been restless all the previous day, debating in his own mind whether he should call upon Miss Ling or not.

At first he thought he would take Rose with him, and then he decided he should get on better alone. He might receive a repulse, he might be an unwelcome visitor, and if it was to be so he should prefer no witnesses, not even Rose.

Paul knocked at the door under the trellised porch, and waited for some minutes, but no one came.

The door stood open, and having knocked a second time rather imperiously, Mrs. Sampson appeared from the back premises in her working costume, her sleeves turned up to the elbow, and her fingers powdered with flour.

"Is Miss Ling at home?" Paul asked.

It was not in Paul's line to concern himself about the village people; they were all alike to him; and though Mrs. Sampson knew him as the young squire, she had never spoken to him before.

"If you will walk in, sir, and excuse my appearance—for I was just in the middle of bread-making—I will

call Miss Ling. The old lady is not very well this morning, and is lying quiet for a bit, and Miss Ling is sitting with her."

Mrs. Sampson took up a corner of her apron, and turning the handle of the sitting-room door, ushered Paul into it.

It was a small square room, with two little windows, which were recessed, and had each a deep window-seat. These windows were the redeeming features of the room, architecturally speaking.

But there were other redeeming features also, not connected with the walls or the chimney-piece, which Paul was not slow to discern.

Taste, that indefinable taste which shows that a room is inhabited by a gentlewoman, was seen, or rather felt, everywhere. The little humble room was transformed by its magic power, and Paul looked round with surprise and admiration.

On a small table pushed close to the wall was a large well-worn case, a heap of manuscript, a round inkstand, and two or three pens.

The sheets of lined foolscap lay open, and the alternate pages were filled with a clear, strong handwriting. Against the wall was an easel, on which was an unfinished water-colour sketch of Westover church, with a line of purple hills beyond. There were several earthenware jugs on the floor of a very common shape, filled with tall grasses and bracken plumes, mixed with clusters of heather and gorse. Trails of ivy were wreathed round the gilt frame of the regulation looking-glass to be found in all rooms like Mrs. Sampson's, with two short gilt pillars surmounted with balls, and a de-

vice of clumsy huge gilt oak leaves at the top. The ivy looked at itself in the little mirror with more satisfaction than Mrs. Bolingbroke had done. She saw her face all a-twist and distorted, and resolutely refrained from a second glance.

One of the window recesses, Paul thought, was evidently appropriated to "Miss Ling."

There were several cushions in an easy-chair, and books and needle-work lay upon the deep window-ledge, which had been covered with red Indian cotton.

Clearly that deep red was a favourite colour, for there was a profusion of common but vivid scarlet geraniums on the mantelpiece, whence Mrs. Sampson had, not without a pang of regret, removed several large china ornaments of fisher boys and shepherdesses, now hiding their charms in a deep cupboard by the fireplace.

Paul had just completed his survey of the room when Stephanie appeared.

Her greeting was certainly not very warm, and Paul felt a little thrown back.

"I am sorry," he began, "that Mrs. Ling is not well, and——"

"My mother is never very strong," Stephanie interrupted; "and we were out a little too late last evening."

Then there was a pause which Stephanie did not seem inclined to break. It implied, however:

"To what am I indebted for the honour of this visit?" or, in other words, "What has brought you here?"

So at least Paul interpreted it. He fidgeted rather awkwardly with a crochet-needle which lay by a ball of blue wool on the table, and said at last:

"As we are near neighbours, I ventured to call and

say that the grounds of Combe Place are open to you at any time, and that I hope you will make what use you please of them for sketching," he said, glancing at the easel, "for I see you are an artist."

"Thanks," Stephanie said, "but I have very little time for drawing. I came here with my mother, who is an invalid, to be entirely quiet—and," she added, with unmistakeable emphasis—"entirely alone. We do not wish for any society."

Paul felt that he was repulsed; in short, that he was not wanted.

"I regret," he said, "that I should have been so bold as to trespass on your time."

"Ah!" she said with a bright smile, which was somewhat reassuring, "we are quits now. You ought to be forgiven, as I have not put up a notice at the gate of Laurel Cottage to warn passers-by that within the little row of palings it is 'private grounds.' As I began by trespassing, I ought to be lenient to you."

"Pray do not visit the sins of my father on me," Paul said with some vehemence; "pray let that discourtesy of his pass from your memory. You must remember that my father is an old man, and very, very far behind the times. He is a Tory of the old school. Averse to any changes, as you may see even by his dress."

"I admired his appearance," Stephanie said, "and I think I admired him. I had no right to pass through that gate, and he was perfectly justified in telling me so."

Paul had risen from his seat, and Stephanie did not encourage him to stay. He, the heir of Combe Place,

the prize in the eyes of many mothers, eagerly sought after by Lady Mason, felt, with a rather unpleasant sense of humiliation, that he was not wanted.

It was a new experience, and perhaps a wholesome one.

He had his hand on the door, and was passing out with a low bow, when Stephanie suddenly held out her hand.

"Mr. Grenville," she said, "I ought to thank you for your kind intentions. Do not think me ungracious, but there are seasons in most lives when solitude is better than society. I have to work rather hard just now, and if I came to Combe Place I might be tempted to be idle. Good-bye, and please do not for a moment think that I am insensible to your kindness."

Paul felt wholly at a loss, and could make no rejoinder. He walked away feeling that he had failed in his errand, and very much disposed to quarrel with himself and all the world.

As he drew near one of the entrances of Combe Place he met Rose Temple. She had been into the village to see an old servant who had been ill. She came up to Paul with a bright smile.

"Well, Paul, have you found your Laurentia?"

"Don't be an idiot, Rose," was the not very polite rejoinder.

"Oh, I see!" Rose said, laughing. "I see! Laurentia has been high and mighty, and did not choose to be patronized. I like her all the better for it."

"Like her!" Paul exclaimed angrily. "Like her! she is quite independent of your likings or dislikings."

She is the most beautiful and charming woman I ever saw."

The shadow of a cloud passed over Rose's pretty face, and finding the subject was not an agreeable one, she hastened to change it.

"We are having a picnic this afternoon, Paul, 'a gipsy tea' as Mrs. Johnstone calls it. Lady Mason has asked several people to join us in the calmest way imaginable, without consulting any one."

"This is getting intolerable, Rose. I don't see who is to throw a bridle over her ladyship's neck, and as to her tongue, it is detestable."

The change of subject did not seem successful, and Rose relapsed into silence, broken just as they reached the house by Paul.

"I say, Rose, I wish you would go and call on Miss Ling; offer to lend her some books, or something of that sort—you know what I mean."

Rose laughed.

"Your reception was not so encouraging that I should be anxious to follow in your steps," Rose said. Then, regaining all her own piquant cheerfulness, she added, "If you will promise to be very agreeable this afternoon—pay Bel and Bee great attention, tell Lady Mason their tennis playing is equal to Renshaw's, and keep Pussie Johnstone at a distance—then I will go and pay Miss Ling a visit to-morrow. Miss Ling! I wish it were a prettier name, don't you, Paul? But to-morrow, if you do exactly what I tell you this afternoon, and only on that condition, mind, I will go to Laurel Cottage, and call on Miss Ling."

And Rose kept her word.

The result of Rose Temple's visit to Laurel Cottage was very different from what she had expected.

If it had been easy for Stephanie to keep Paul Grenville at a respectful distance, and refuse all his offers of neighbourly attention, it was impossible to repulse Rose. Even if Stephanie had wished to do so she could not have carried out her intention.

The winsome girl soon took her heart by storm, and, indeed, in her solitary life, shadowed as it was by the great dread of discovery by Mr. Hardman, Stephanie found Rose's little attentions a gratification and a solace.

When once the ice was broken, and the first advance made, everything fell naturally into the constant interchange of friendly intercourse.

Rose's visits were looked forward to; and as the days shortened, and the autumn evenings closed in early, Stephanie began to feel more secure that her hiding-place had not been discovered, and that the pursuer was off the scent.

Stephanie's spirits rose as the days went on, and she was full of brightness, and responded to Rose's merriment.

"You don't know what Stephanie can be like, Paul. She sees things in the most amusing light, and she has a wonderful power of mimicry."

Paul did not quite like to hear of this gift. He thought it probable he might be its victim sometimes.

"It is never ill-natured mimicry," Rose hastened to say. "But she catches the dialect of these village people exactly, and the tone too; but the time to see her is with sick people. Do you know she got up in the night and went to that poor child of Mrs. Band's

at the farm, and really saved its life, Dr. Dove says, by her skill! It was croup, and she managed him splendidly, and never lost her presence of mind. Dr. Dove told me so. Then how gentle she is with Mrs. Ling, who is rather trying sometimes, and fretful!"

"Do you ever hear anything about Miss Ling's past history, Rose?"

"No; of course I ask no questions that would be impertinent. But from things she has let drop, I fancy she has had great trouble. You know she writes for money, and she has just finished a book for the publishers of the *Decade*. She sits up late at night to do this. I don't fancy they could get on at all if she did not work with her pen. And then her pictures and her sketches are beautiful."

"I shall come for you next time you go to Laurel Cottage," Paul said.

"The next time will be this afternoon," Rose replied; and then, after a little hesitation:

"I don't think you had better come again so soon. You were there on Sunday after service, you know."

"I shall please myself," Paul said crossly. "Really, I am not likely to bear being dictated to by you about my visits to Miss Ling."

It was not the first time that Rose had felt a sharp pang from the way that Paul spoke to her.

"He never used to be like this," she thought. "I wonder what is the reason. I do hope the Masons will not come back on their way from Torquay. Lady Mason is sure to be disagreeable to Paul about Stephanie."

But Lady Mason did come back. She wrote an

effusive letter to Sir John, saying she had felt a little relaxed by the Torquay air, and felt a breath of moorland would invigorate her before she settled in at home for the winter.

Sir John tossed the letter to Rose, and said:

"Let Mrs. Bird know her ladyship is returning."

"Like a bad penny!" murmured Paul under his breath.

Sir John's ears were sharp, and he said:

"The house is my own, sir, and I invite whom I choose to be my guests."

"You don't invite this guest, father; she saves you the trouble by inviting herself."

"You think that a sharp turn to give to the subject, eh, Paul? Witty and clever to play on the words, eh?"

"I think nothing of the sort, sir. You must have a poor idea of wit if you think me witty."

"I said you thought yourself witty. You are begging the question. But enough of this. Lady Mason is a relative of one whom I loved and honoured; let that suffice, and I beg no discussion may be raised about her visit now, or at any other time. Do you hear? Now, what news in the paper to-day? Glance over the leading articles, and tell me."

Paul opened the paper, and appeared to be doing what his father wished, but he was not really thinking of the news. What was it to him that the Eiffel Tower was rising rapidly towards completion; that the queen of Servia had been banished from the country and that the king had rued the day. What was it to Paul at that moment, that the Parnell Commission had

opened, and that the true story of the "forged letters" would soon be unearthed. Nothing seemed at this moment of any importance to Paul, except the fact that he should certainly go for Rose to Laurel Cottage that afternoon, whether she liked it or not; and that as Lady Mason, and those two conceited daughters of hers, would be at Combe Place the next day, it was better to embrace the opportunity afforded of seeing Stephanie, without the chance of having any discussion with Lady Mason on the subject.

Rosie's visit to Stephanie had been a very happy one, and she was just preparing to go back to Combe Place when Paul came up to the door.

He bore in his hand a basket of lovely grapes, and Mrs. Bolingbroke was delighted, and called upon Stephanie to admire them.

"Yes, they are beautiful; too beautiful to eat," Stephanie said.

"Yes; I almost grudge to eat them," Mrs. Bolingbroke said.

"Pray don't. There are plenty more where these came from; and I shall be only too happy to bring another basket to-morrow."

"You are very kind," Mrs. Bolingbroke said. "We have never half thanked you for the partridges and the grouse."

Stephanie had been arranging the grapes in a large china bowl, one of Mrs. Sampson's most cherished possessions, and Paul watched how delicately she fingered them, and how she settled the leaves so that their bloom was not touched. She talked to Rose as she did so, but never addressed a word to Paul. If ever

eyes told the tale of deep admiration, and something deeper still, Paul Grenville's eyes told it then.

Did she guess it was so? and was that the reason that she was so uniformly courteous but cold in her manner to him?

Paul was not repulsed now, but he was never warmly welcomed; and Rose noticed that a shadow came over Stephanie, and her manner became constrained, whenever Paul appeared.

Presently Rose said:

"Come, Paul, we must be going now. It is getting dark. The days are so short."

"Yes," Stephanie said, "I think it will be very damp soon, for a moorland mist is rising." As she spoke she took Rose's fur cape, and, putting it on, kissed the sweet face turned up to hers.

"Good-bye," Rose said. "I may not be able to come to-morrow; for Lady Mason and Bee and Bel are coming back. We are not very much delighted at the prospect, are we, Paul? Now, Paul!"

Paul stood like a man in a dream. He was telling himself that he was in love with Stephanie, and that there was but little hope for him.

He just touched her hand at parting, and bidding Mrs. Bolingbroke a hasty good-bye, he followed Rose to the gate; and Stephanie, leaning on the window-ledge with her face close to the casement, watched the two figures vanish in the misty air of the autumn evening.

"You scarcely thanked Mr. Grenville, Stephanie, for those lovely grapes. I cannot understand you. He is so kind. I am sure I do not know what I should have done without him here."

"I am so glad, mother, that you should have game to tempt your appetite. Mr. Grenville finds you very attractive, I am sure."

"Nonsense, Stephanie. You must see that he is more deeply in love with you every day."

"Mother, do stop, please." Then rallying herself, she said:

"I do not think Mr. Grenville could be very deeply in love with any one; it would be too much trouble."

But all that evening Stephanie was scarcely like herself. She began to read the story which amused her mother with a distracted air; and presently Mrs. Bolingbroke said:

"You read that chapter last night, Stephanie; don't you remember about the boat accident?"

"Did I?" Stephanie said. "Oh, yes! somehow all stories are so much alike, one gets mixed."

"Well, don't read if it is too much trouble for you," was the rather fretful rejoinder. "I think that author's stories very pretty and interesting, and not like everybody's. But I am no judge, I know."

Stephanie roused herself, and began to read with her accustomed spirit, till it was time for her mother to retire.

But long, long into the night Stephanie sat alone thinking over her mother's words, which had touched her in a very sensitive place. Then Rose's pretty face rose before her, and all her sweetness and kindness to her.

"Is it to be my fate to bring her trouble? If possible it must be averted, even if we have to seek another home."

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It was a bright crisp autumn morning when Rose came with her quick elastic step up the garden, and looking in at the open casement said:

"Will you come for a walk? Please do."

Stephanie pointed to her table, full of papers, and shook her head.

"Oh, you must come for my sake? We are all at sixes and sevens at the Combe. Lady Mason is not in a sweet temper, and Bee and Bel have been beaten at a tennis tournament at Torquay, which has not helped to make things brighter, and Paul is—well, in one of his contrary moods."

"Well," Stephanie said, "if you will come in and wait five minutes, I will get ready. Mother is not down yet."

Rose came in as she was told, and found herself alone in the little sitting-room. A number of papers and letters lay in some confusion on the table, and the address of one struck her—"Miss Bolingbroke, Victoria Villas, Herne Hill."

Who was Miss Bolingbroke? Did she live with the Lings. Stephanie had told her of a friend who had been very useful to her, and from whom she had learned a great deal. Perhaps Miss Bolingbroke was that friend. Stephanie never mentioned anyone's name, and seldom, very seldom, referred to the past.

Rose was still meditating on the address on the letter, with a curiosity she could not account for, when Stephanie returned, ready for her walk.

"I have only one hour I can really call my own," she said; "but I should like to go across to the Farm, and see the child there, my patient, you know."

"Oh, no, let us go to your tor, the sun is so warm, and it is sheltered there. I don't like visiting sick people," said Rose honestly. "I go to old Mary because I have known her all my life; but I am always glad when her attacks are over, and she is in her little sitting-room again. We hear so much about health, you know, from Uncle John. He muffles himself with comforters on the hottest day, and wears a big cloak. Oh, I forgot," she said, laughing and blushing, "you saw Uncle John that day, and you know all about his appearance. I can see you now as you looked on the bank, and Uncle John with his hat in his hand bowing to you, and how Paul actually exerted himself to row, that we might come over to the rescue. What did you think of Paul and me, I wonder?"

"I thought you were Mr. Grenville's sister," Stephanie replied.

"Yes; and you are not the first person who has thought so," Rose said, the bright colour on her cheek deepening, "and in reality we are no relation to each other."

"Are you engaged to Mr. Grenville, Rose?"

The question was put with a suddenness, after a pause, which startled Rose.

"Oh! no, no!" she replied. "I don't think we, that is, I don't think he, ever thought of such a thing, or of me, in that way. Of course he likes me better than the Masons, who try to force him to be agreeable, and try to flirt with him. Paul likes to be left alone. I understand him, and never worry him; perhaps that is why he and I are such good friends."

Stephanie was silent for a moment; they had reached

the two boulders, now lichen-covered, between which Stephanie had found a retreat where she could be quite alone. There was just room for the two girls, and Stephanie bent her head to enter, while Rose's little figure could pass in without any effort. The two large boulders leaned towards each other, touching at their extreme edges. A large stone deeply sunk in the turf made a seat wide enough for two, and through the crevice above the girls' heads a narrow strip of the deep blue sky was seen, fringed with the trail of a bramble branch, with crimson and yellow leaves. In front the moor dipped down into the hollow where Westover lay, and formed part of the rising ground, well planted, which shut in the estate of Combe Place.

"I think," Rose said presently, "Paul does care more for me than for anybody else; but not in the way you mean."

"If he cares for you more than for anyone else," Stephanie said, "the deeper feeling will come; you are just the bright and energetic little creature who would make a man of him!"

Rose looked into Stephanie's face with pure child-like eyes, which were full of surprise as she repeated, "Make a man of him! Paul is very, very clever. He reads everything, and he writes beautiful poetry. One volume of verses is in the press. It is a secret, because of course Uncle John would only laugh at him. It is Uncle John's way to be satirical. But I know I may tell you about the book, because I am certain you would like some of the poems, especially the sonnets. Do you write poetry?" Rose asked rather shyly; for though Stephanie's drawings and sketches and needle-

work had been fully discussed and admired, no reference had yet been made to the book which Stephanie said she had written, although the papers contributed to the *Decade* had been spoken of with freedom.

"You are an authoress, I know, but perhaps not a poetess."

"No, indeed," Stephanie said, laughing. "Poets and poetesses are not so plentiful as blackberries, while people who write stories are very plentiful—*too* plentiful," she said with a sigh.

"It sometimes amuses me, and sometimes makes me sick at heart as I sit driving my pen over sheets of paper, when I remember how many thousands of other pens are driven in like manner, by all sorts and conditions of men and women. Some out of pure love of their work, others out of dire necessity, and to earn their daily bread, or, at any rate, to provide for their daily needs. And then the heart-aches and the disappointments, the rejected manuscripts, the scoffing notices if a book is published, the losses, and the weariness, the misconception of one's real aims and hopes! and—— Ah! little Rose, I often wish I had lived a hundred years ago, a comfortable, easy-going life, in some country place, like William Cowper or Jane Austen—though, to be sure," she said, laughing again, "William Cowper was generally in the lowest spirits, and Jane Austen liked Bath."

Rose Temple was surprised to listen to her new friend's view of the life of one whom she in a reverent tone, almost with bated breath, called an authoress; but she said:

"Paul does not feel like you about his poetry; he

reads it to me as we lie in the old boat in summer, and in the winter in the library, and lately"—Rose stopped, and then went on hurriedly—"lately there is always someone in his verses who is tall and stately, with starry eyes and——"

Stephanie laughed, this time merrily.

"Dusky hair! Ah! that is not original poetry, I am afraid."

"It is very pretty, and very musical," Rose said, half offended; "it is indeed. I should like to read you some verses I have in my pocket, which Paul got me to copy for him last night. I don't think he would mind, and I should like to tell him you admired them. May I read them?"

Stephanie assented, and Rose read:

"As, far away from human reach,
I roam among the shadowy tors,
Sounds, sights, and fragrance—all and each
Are fraught with something that is yours.
See, to be likened to your hair,
How the dusk hyacinths rejoice!
Your breath is on the ambient air,
The summer winds are like your voice.

"And when was it that once I knew
The warm brown tinge of yonder pool,
Seen when the sunbeams through and through
Light up its waters clear and cool?
Why, 'twas the very hue which late
Flashed on me from your gracious eyes
When parting at your garden gate,
They smote me with a strong surprise.

"Light such as theirs can only glow
In eyes which many a livelong year,

O'er scenes of human joy and woe,
Have watched with vision calm and clear;
Which, bending as with noble grief
O'er faults and follies, crimes and sin,
Still wait, in fulness of belief,
To see the better day begin.

"Yes, like the waters' overflow,
Earth shall receive the great 'To Be.'
I know not when; but this I know,
A gift of God once came to me—
That day when first I learned the skill
Your breath in the sweet air to find,
Your glances in the dark brown rill,
Your voice in every whispering wind."

Rose waited for a few minutes, hoping to hear some words of praise fall from Stephanie's lips, but she was silent. She sat with her hands folded, looking out on the landscape seen through the opening of her chapel, where purple shadows came and went as the autumn sky was flecked with clouds fast rising in the north.

"I think we ought to be going home now," Stephanie said. "My hour's recreation is over. Come," and starting up, she walked away so quickly that Rose could scarcely keep up to her. When they had reached the village again, Rose lingered by the gate of Laurel Cottage.

"You did not say whether you liked those verses. Surely they may be called poetry."

"Yes, they deserve the name better than most rhymes, I allow."

"May I tell Paul you like them?"

"Did he tell you to read them to me?" Stephanie asked, with a sudden flash in her eyes which was like

the light on the brown streamlet, when, while the sun looks down into it, the waters sparkle as a stone is dropped in, and then are quiet again.

"Did he tell you," she repeated, "to read that poem to me?"

"No; oh, no!"

Then with a kiss Stephanie said "Good-bye," and hurried into the house.

Mrs. Bolingbroke had come downstairs; was chilly, and wanted a fire lighted, which Mrs. Sampson was vainly persuading to burn.

"It is nearly October. We must begin fires, Stephanie. To-morrow will be the first of October; it is quite time."

"As you please, ma'am," Mrs. Sampson said, rising from her knees exhausted with her efforts to puff the twigs with which the fire had been laid into a flame. "As you please. Coal is very dear here in these parts; the hauling has to be took into consideration. And this room is that sunny that Mr. Baker used to call it a greenhouse. He lodged with me for nearly two years, and he scarcely ever had a fire in the daytime."

Stephanie had thrown aside her hat, and said pleasantly:

"I dare say Mr. Baker could get plenty of exercise out of doors, Mrs. Sampson. My mother is obliged to sit so much in the house, and therefore feels the cold. May I come into the kitchen and look for some dry sticks and two or three lumps of coal? These are too much like cinders, and I think probably the chimney is unaired."

"Of course, Miss Ling, you can please yourself as

to fires; and I will either charge by the day, or you can get your own ton of coals in. Sampson could fetch a load in the donkey-cart from the dealer at Lustleigh, for a trifle, and that would save money."

"Yes, I think that would be a very good plan; but now I must try and light the fire, Mrs. Ling is so cold."

And Stephanie wrapped another shawl round her mother's shoulders, and then set herself to make a cheerful blaze.

She had just succeeded, and was flushed with the heat after her blow on the moor, when there was a tap at the door, a tap which seemed to show that some one of importance demanded admission.

"It is two ladies, Miss Ling; shall I show them in? It's two ladies from the Court," she said, to emphasize the information.

And in another moment Lady Mason and Bel had filled the little room with their presence.

Lady Mason was bent on patronage, and Stephanie grew her stiffest and stateliest at once.

"How do you do?" Lady Mason said to Stephanie, in a voice which certainly was not that excellent thing in woman of which the poet speaks.

"How do you do? I really thought, Miss Ling, as Rose Temple, who is like a child of my own, is so often here, I might venture to call. It is awkward, you know, when one member of a family is intimate with a neighbour and the rest are strangers. Now, Bel, you will find something to talk about of mutual interest with Miss Ling, as you are both literary in your tastes; for I hear you write in the *Decade*, Miss Ling, under the *nom de plume* of Stephanie.

"It is not a *nom de plume*," Stephanie said, repressing her annoyance with a strong effort.

"She was named after her dear father," Mrs. Bolingbroke said; "his name was Stephen."

Stephanie gave her mother a look which seemed to say, "Do not gratify impertinent curiosity," and then Lady Mason started off on her quest. She had come to find out what the people were like to whose house Rose was always running off, and, more important still, Paul!

Curiosity had surely never been so ill-satisfied, patronage never less successful. The literary conversation with Bel did not absorb Stephanie's attention so much that she was unable to listen with the other ear to what her mother was saying. Mrs. Bolingbroke was a little flurried it is true, but she held her ground pretty well.

"Now tell me, do tell me, if you are comfortable in the cottage. Mrs. Sampson is really a respectable woman, but lodgings are at the best a poor substitute for one's own home. Are you staying here long? I see you have a sign of winter in the fire, but I expect you won't stay very long. The moors are chilly in the winter, and the white mists rise so suddenly. We migrate in a fortnight's time. Dear Sir John is so determined to keep us while his son has a few friends for shooting next week, and one of my boys comes for a few days. Have you any boys?"

"I have one son," said poor Mrs. Bolingbroke.

"Ah! a great treasure, no doubt. Is he at school, or at Oxford?"

"He is in Australia."

"Ah! *how* wise! This country is really overrun with

young men, who find it difficult to get an opening. My eldest son is reading for the Bar, and just snatches a week here, as I said, for a little recreation. The younger is with a tutor, and matriculates in the following term at Oxford. Now really I admire that sketch very much. Bel, have you noticed it? I call it clever. You have no piano, I see; *how* do you live without music? My girls always say it is the breath of life to them, and to me also. It is quite lamentable to see dear Rose Temple utterly unable to play the easiest accompaniment. Now tell me"—this was a very favourite adjuration of Lady Mason—"Now tell me," turning to Stephanie, "is it not a great privation to be without music? If you could come up to Combe Place—let me see, some morning, my girls would play to you, I am sure."

"Thanks," said Stephanie. "I am always engaged in the morning, and I am not visiting anywhere in this neighbourhood."

Bel had possessed herself of a number of the *Decade*, and was turning over its pages with a grand air.

"It's an awfully dull magazine," she said, "no one of any note writes in it. There is not a well-known name amongst the contributors. "Oh, yes—there is one! I hate magazine literature. I go in for deeper reading—don't you?"

"When I can get it," was the reply; "and when I do, I give it up if I get out of my depth."

Bel laughed a little satirical laugh.

"Ah! I daresay. Have you read the *Fourth Dimension*? It is short; but it is tremendously clever; only one needs a mathematical brain to follow it."

"Mine is not a mathematical brain," was the answer; "clearly I had no right to read the *Fourth Dimension*."

"Then you *have* read it? but I daresay you did not care for it."

It was over at last, and mother and daughter departed. They had both that secret sense of discomfiture which is disagreeable when any scheme is baffled. Lady Mason felt she had learned very little of these mysterious people, "The Lings," and Bel felt that, after all, her superior intellect and erudition had not been recognised.

"What did they come for, Stephanie?" poor Mrs. Bolingbroke asked, "Do they live at Combe Place?"

"No, mother, they are unbidden guests there—people who are as irrepressible as they are impertinent."

"I hope they will not come again, Stephanie. Cannot you warn Mrs. Sampson not to admit them? It is too much for us to be questioned in that way. I hope I did not gratify Lady Mason's curiosity about poor dear Aubrey too."

"No, dear mother, you did beautifully; and I don't think Lady Mason will repeat her visit."

"I can't imagine what made her come."

"I can," said Stephanie, "and I only rejoice to think she got so little for her pains; and now after all these interruptions I shall have no time for my work before dinner. It is nearly one o'clock. But I can just get a proof ready for the postman when he calls."

Then Stephanie settled herself to her table, and began to make those mystic signs on the margin of the

printed sheet which are the bane of printers, and try their patience to the uttermost.

As Stephanie proceeded a smile broke over her face, and at last she laughed aloud.

"What is it, dear? Is there anything amusing in that sheet? let me hear."

"No, mother, I was only thinking how flattering Miss Mason was to the *Decade*, and how I wish I could let the editor join in my laugh.

"The poor *Decade*! 'It is such an awfully dull magazine, and no one of any note ever writes in it.' Poor *Decade*!"

"But, my dear, there must be a mistake," said Mrs. Bolingbroke. "What could she mean when your poor father said it was quite enough to bring you into notice as an author, when your name appeared with that of so many leading writers of the day in the list of contributors. What *could* she mean, Stephanie?"

"My dear mother, she only meant that Miss Bel Mason's name was absent from the list, that's all."

CHAPTER X.

THE NET IS SPREAD.

THAT day was the last of sunshine for some time. A persistent rain set in and swelled all the little streams till the lake in the Combe Place grounds was near overflowing its banks, and there was a murmur of running waters everywhere.

Lady Mason was laid up with a cold, and Sir John with an attack of gout. Paul was restless and uneasy, always longing to get to Laurel Cottage, and yet afraid of intruding where he was not wanted.

Lady Mason's second visit had annoyed him, Rose thought, unreasonably, and she ventured to say that Miss Ling was not so sacred a personage that she might not be called upon like other people. Besides, Mrs. Johnstone had called, and Mrs. Dove, the doctor's wife, and Mr. and Mrs. Daniels; why should not Lady Mason go if she chose?

"Because she had no business to do so without telling you. She is not a fixture here, thank goodness. I only hope this cold will not keep her here after the day originally proposed."

"All things must come to an end," Rose said; "and the Masons' visit cannot last for ever. When they are gone, and the people you have asked for shooting, we can settle in for the winter; and I really think when no

one is here, and Uncle John asks her himself, Stephanie will come sometimes."

"I don't believe she will," Paul said. "You can't expect it after my father's rudeness that first day. And now Lady Mason has put the finishing stroke to the affair by calling and pumping her with questions. Such gross impertinence!"

"Poor Paul," Rose said, "I am sorry you take it so to heart. If it clears up I am going to run down to Laurel Cottage directly after luncheon, and you may come for me."

"All right; and I will bring some flowers. I will go and see about them now, and some more grapes."

Rose stood where Paul had left her for some minutes. There was a pain at her heart she did not even like to acknowledge, and she had brushed away a tear just as Bel Mason came into the library to look for a book.

"Why, Rose, what are you doing? Are you counting the rain drops? You know the verse—

"Where do you come from,
You little drops of rain—
Pitter-patter, pitter-patter,
On the window pane?"

"I was looking at that break in the clouds," Rose said. "I think it will be fine this afternoon."

"Do you? Then you will be able to get down to see the beautiful Laurentia, and you will be happy, and someone else happier still. Don't look so innocent, you know who I mean. Well, we must all be happy in our own way, I suppose. My way is just now to make

some notes from Lecky's *History*. Sir John would not lend me the book to take away. He is such a miser over his books; and he never reads them, except those on hygiene and treatises on gout and rheumatism."

"Uncle John reads a great deal," Rose said sharply, "and no one is better acquainted with what is passing in the world than he is."

"Well, I shall not venture to contradict you, my dear. No wonder you are a little out of sorts, for it must be provoking to you to see Paul so devoted to Miss Ling."

A sharp retort rose to Rose's lips, but she felt so perilously near tears that she said nothing, leaving Bel to the enjoyment of the library, where she skimmed in her superficial fashion over a variety of books, and made extracts which it was convenient to quote when necessary.

Sir John was in his own sitting-room, which opened from his bedroom, and as Rose passed the door she heard Paul's voice raised in not very pleasant tones. The door opened and he came out, meeting Rose as he did so.

"Go in and see my father," he said. "He is very cantankerous to-day."

Rose went gently into the room.

"Shall I read to you, Uncle John? I should like to read, if you wish."

"No; sit down and tell me what is going on in the house. Is anything amiss with Paul? That young gentleman had planned a foreign tour for this winter. What has knocked it out of his head, eh?"

"I don't know, Uncle John. Do you wish him to go so very much?"

Sir John's keen, deep-set eyes were fixed on Rose.

"My dear," he said, "I think the variety will be wholesome, salutary, or what you like to call it. Do you dread a dull winter with a poor old man, a gouty invalid, whose temper is none of the sweetest, and whose health is as uncertain as his temper, eh?"

"I am always glad to be with you, Uncle John; you are my only friend."

"No, no, little Rose, you will have plenty of friends; you bring love wherever you go, child. Now tell me, Does that hopeful son of mine haunt the precincts of Laurel Cottage, and pay his devoirs to the stately lady, the trespasser—Laurentia, eh?"

This last "eh" was sharp, and twice repeated.

"Eh? Truth now, honest truth."

Rose hesitated.

"Is she laying a trap for my son?"

Rose could answer now.

"No, Uncle John, no; Stephanie never, never encourages Paul to go into the house at all. When she sees him coming for me, she always tells me to make haste and put on my hat; you don't know how good she is!" said poor little Rose, her heart sinking within her.

As so often happens, all these remarks about Paul's devotion to Stephanie had made her look into her own heart, and what she saw there brought a dull pain, and sent the tears to her eyes.

"She may be good," Sir John continued. "I dare say she is, as you say so; but I will have no nonsense

going on between her and my son. He shall go to Florence or Rome, or wherever he chooses, but he shall *not* go to Laurel Cottage to make a fool of himself. Why it's preposterous; these people are adventurers. I dare say they will make off without paying a penny they owe."

"Uncle John!" Rose exclaimed, greatly distressed, "how can you say such a thing? You should hear the Sampsons talk of Stephanie, and the village people too. If there is any trouble anywhere she goes and helps. She saved the life of the Bands' child at the farm, and she has made old Goody Wick's bed for her every day since her daughter left her. Ask Mr. and Mrs. Daniels about her; Mr. Daniels knows what she does in the parish, he will tell you. Stephanie is really so good and religious."

"Religious!" Sir John said contemptuously, "so is Lady Mason, and—well, well, I'll make it clear to you, little Rose, that you will not aid and abet any underhand proceedings."

"There are no underhand proceedings, Uncle John," Rose said with some heat.

"Well, well, I am not angry with you, so you need not look so injured, Rosebud. We will go on as we are till the guests are all cleared off, and then we will pack our fine gentleman off to Italy, and we will have a cosy winter with no fuss and no bother. You can invite that old cousin of your poor aunt's to come and keep you company. She is a good-natured soul, and it does her a kindness, and saves her a winter's board and lodgings, to say nothing of keeping up fires. There is nothing on earth more cheering than a big fire.

Here," to a servant who entered with a tray, on which was one of Sir John's frequent light repasts, "Here, throw on some more wood, the day is frightfully cold."

Rose made her escape at this moment, and ran to her own room.

"I see it all," she said, clasping her hands. "How can I have been so foolish as to think that I was everything to him? I am nothing, nothing; only useful to him, and now he makes me useful in his schemes for getting to Laurel Cottage. I will not lend myself to such schemes any more, I will not go near Stephanie to-day; and yet it is no fault of hers. I am sure she gives him no encouragement, and I love her and admire her. After all I can't give up a friend like her, so I shall run off after luncheon, but I shall not tell Paul."

By this it will be seen that Rose's mind was variable. The rain ceased, and Lady Mason ordered the carriage and declared her intention of driving to Pember-ton, a distance of some miles, to call on a lady whose acquaintance she wished to cultivate.

Thus the coast was clear; and as soon as the carriage drove off Paul appeared in the hall. The basket of grapes and flowers was in his hand.

"Will you take them for me?" he asked. "Perhaps she will like it best if you take them. What's the matter?"

Poor Rose turned away and said:

"You had better take them yourself."

It was so unlike Rose to be disobliging, especially to him, that Paul was too much surprised to make any remark.

"Very well," he said, and taking up the basket he went back into the library.

Rose went through the grounds, teeming with moisture, and when she reached the gate leading to the Westover road, Macdonald, the keeper, met her, and opened it for her.

"Have you met a gentleman, miss, in the grounds? There's one about enquiring if some people named Bolingbroke live in these parts."

"Bolingbroke! That question is easily answered," Rose said. "That is a name we should be sure to notice if we heard of it amongst the few people who live here."

"Yes, so I said," Macdonald answered. "There's been a heavy downfall, and the brook is swelled as I never remember it; and two of Farmer Band's yearlings have been drowned out by the cross-ways."

"Poor things," Rose said. "How is your wife, Macdonald?"

"But very so-so, miss, always pleased to see you when you can spare a few minutes. Miss Ling has been kind to her several times. She is a wonderfully nice young lady."

"Yes," was Rose's short response. "Good-bye, Macdonald."

Rose pursued her way along the muddy road to the village, and as she neared the churchyard she heard quick steps behind her. A small, dark man, in a long coat and a tall hat with a narrow brim, which had seen its best days, came up to her.

"I beg your pardon, miss," touching his hat rather than lifting it, "but I am a stranger in these parts, and

I thought I might just venture to ask you if you knew a family here called Bolingbroke."

"No," Rose said, rather disliking the man's familiar manner and the scrutiny of his large, prominent eyes. "No, there is no one of that name here."

"It ain't a large place surely," said the man; "and you must all live a sort of family life here, so you'd know if there was such a lady and her daughter living here."

They were at the gate of Laurel Cottage now, and Rose hastened to the porch, tapping, as was her custom, and then going in.

She looked flurried, and Stephanie came to greet her with a kiss.

"I scarcely expected you this wet day," she said. "Take off your cloak."

"Such a disagreeable man overtook me," Rose said. "Look, he is at the gate now! He is asking for some people called Bolingbroke, and he has been enquiring about them of Macdonald. He is such a horrid man," Rose continued.

Stephanie, to her surprise, only said, "I am sorry you have been annoyed, darling." Then quickly, and in a tone too low to reach her mother's ears as she came into the room, "Do not say any more about it, or mother will think it is unsafe for me to tramp about on the moors and lonely roads." Then in a louder voice Stephanie went on, "Is it not nice to have Rose this dull day to cheer us, mother? You must stay to tea, and I will walk to the gate with you, Rose. I am going to touch up a sketch while the light lasts, and you must amuse us. And ask Rose to put the pattern

of your crochet shawl right, mother. I am so stupid at crochet."

So the afternoon passed, and at four the tea came, and with it Paul with his flowers and grapes. He came in with a more assured air than usual, and devoted himself to Mrs. Bolingbroke, and listened to her rather long story of neuralgic and nervous headaches, which were so hard to bear.

Rose and Paul walked home together in an unwonted silence, and it was broken by Paul:

"As soon as the house is cleared, I shall try to get Mrs. Ling up to the Combe for a change. Poor woman, I pity her, in that little room, shut up day after day."

"When are you going to Italy, Paul?"

"I am not going to Italy at all. I may go up to London in November, but it is uncertain."

"Old Mrs. Pearson is to spend the winter here," Rose said.

"She will be a cheerful companion truly, but I allow she is better than Lady Mason. She is good-tempered and harmless, while the other is ill-tempered and mischievous."

"Paul," Rose said as they passed into the large hall, where a brilliant fire was blazing merrily on the open hearth. "Paul, can I copy any more poetry for you? There is that long poem on Joinville, of which you said you must have a fresh copy made."

"Thanks, yes; it will be awfully kind, for I do hate copying my own poetry. I always feel inclined to throw it into the fire instead of writing it over again."

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The little dark man in the well-worn coat and hat, found his way through mud and mire to the Westover Junction that evening. He was not precisely successful, but on the whole not altogether discouraged. As he sat on the edge of the seat of the empty first-class carriage (for he had been travelling first-class for some days), with his hand on a little black bag by his side, he alternately picked his teeth with a silver tooth-pick, and looked at his watch by the light of the rather dim lamp in the roof of the carriage, and indulged in a low monotone of soliloquy:

"Some things fit, some don't; but though the old lady at the post-office was a close one, and a sharp one too, I think I made out Miss Ling had a large correspondence—'a good few letters,' as the old dame expressed it. 'A good few; ah! some of them big ones.' 'Well, yes, they were not small.' 'London postmark, chiefly.' 'May be.' 'And where do the answers go?' I had her there. 'Was it any business of mine?' she asked. Then, happy thought, I said, 'May be Miss Ling was coming in for a fortune. If she could be proved to be the right young woman, it would be doing a kindness to give a clue, for it was a very large fortune, very large indeed.' 'Yes, many of the letters went to London, no name on them though, nothing but "Editor." Editor, she called it 'iditor.' 'Ah! of the *Decade* perhaps.' 'She didn't know, she was not going to say any name.' No, but it's near enough; now then, Tom Cater, put two and two together and make a grand total of facts." Whereupon Mr. Cater took out a black pocket-book, and turned over the leaves, and read:

“Torquay—no go, nothing to be got there; ditto, Plymouth, Exeter, Totnes, Newton. Moors, a happy thought. I’ll just make an entry, and try to prove a sum total. ‘Lady and daughter arrive at Westover in July,’ good. ‘Young lady tall and handsome, a bit lofty in manner,’ good; ‘has a large correspondence, despatches letters marked “Editor,”’ good; name ‘Ling.’ Ling. She don’t quite fit Ling.” Presently Mr. Cater slapped his knee with a triumphant ah, ha! “Bo-lingbroke! Bo-lingbroke! I have you, my lady, I have you,” and then the book was replaced in the black bag, and on the arrival of the train at the Newton Abbot station he went to an hotel, ordered an excellent dinner, and next went to bed, satisfied that the quest of some weeks, which had hitherto been ineffectual, was at last likely to be brought to a happy conclusion, and that his patron would reward him well for his pains.

Meanwhile those who were most particularly concerned in Mr. Cater’s discovery were for the most part all unconscious of the net that was closing in round them. Perhaps the person most interested was not altogether without fears. She wrote to Mr. Middleton and to Mr. Swifte, to tell them that a man had been seen in the village, who inquired if any people of the name of Bolingbroke were at or near Westover, and asking advice as to the desirability of making a move again.

But removal was considered out of the question by Mrs. Bolingbroke, neuralgia, of which she had given so many details to Paul, becoming very severe, and Stephanie called in Dr. Dove, who at once said Mrs.

Lings's temperature was very high, and that she must be kept to her bed for some days.

The hopes that St. Luke's summer might bring a change in the weather were not realized. A more stormy and rainy October no one could remember. Mists, the white thick mists of the moorland, so familiar to those who know that country, were continually rising and blotting out every object except those within a yard of the eye in all directions.

In this wretched weather and with Sir John laid up with gout, Lady Mason began to pine after the villa at Leamington, and the little coterie there, to whom she delighted to retail the glories of her summer visits, and especially of her happy sojourn at dear Sir John Grenville's.

Herbert Mason came for the promised week, but shooting was melancholy work, with rain and mist saturating everything with moisture, and taking the sport out of the keenest sportsman!

But Herbert Mason's visit did not pass without poor Rose receiving a fresh lesson as to the real condition of her heart.

Herbert Mason, who was thoroughly in earnest, and a good though by no means a brilliant young man, in spite of his mother's prophecy that he would be the leader of some circuit at a very early age, told Rose in a very plain and simple fashion that he loved her, had loved her for years, and might he dare to hope. "No," was all poor Rose could say. He must not hope; he must not think of her in any way but as a friend; it

was utterly and entirely impossible that she could ever be anything else.

So poor Herbert Mason departed disconsolately, and inwardly vowed vengeance against that lazy fellow who, though he dared not ask the question, he felt sure had been before him in the field. While Rose, tearful and sad, felt a melancholy consolation in writing out in her fair, clear hand a copy for Paul. Patiently revising the copy, scrawled over and altered again and again, and sometimes despairing whether a copy fair enough would ever be made for the press.

Everything, or almost everything, that Paul wrote seemed in Rose's eyes beautiful, and it had been a labour of love hitherto; but now she sat with the pen in her hand, and the familiar writing before her, feeling as if the sweetness had gone out of the service, and reproaching herself for her own folly. What if, disappointed and sad, perhaps embittered, Paul went out, like the hero of his verse, to do battle with himself, and returned no more?

What if his father remained determined that Paul should go, and leave him desolate in his old age, rather than that he should bring Stephanie to his home as his wife? For Rose no longer doubted or questioned that Paul loved this new friend with a love he had never given her, and she also knew that his father would never receive Stephanie, and that Paul would probably go away, and perhaps return no more.

It was often through blinding tears, which were hastily wiped away, and with a sore heart, that even

now could scarcely bear to acknowledge the cause of its pain, that Rose wrote the poem which Paul had simply called—

JOINVILLE.

The good king,* hasting for the Holy Land,
Summoned his host, "A month and we must go!"
Meantime he bade me in my home rejoice.
Thither I rode. My friends and neighbours came.
Six days we feasted high, with ruby wine
And mirth and song and joyous minstrelsy:
Then, on the holy fast, together all
Shriven in the chapel knelt. Our worship done,
They stood around me in the castle hall,
And following ancient customs of our land,
For men just parting to a far-off war,
I spoke: "Friends, kinsmen, brethren, neighbours all,
Stands any here whom I have wronged in word,
Or deed, or thought? If such perchance there be—
Although I know it not—let him declare
The wrong in face of all, then true amends,
As it befits me, frankly will I make;
For thus alone could I endure to draw
My father's sword in battle, leaving nought
Of wrong unhealed to work me earthly shame,
Or cleaving to the soul my whole life through,
To cry against me in the courts of God."

This said, awhile I stept aside to give
To all due time for thought; thus uncontrolled,
Nor following impulses in reckless haste,
Each heart its own remembrance might recall,

* St. Louis.

And every tongue prepare, by fitting words,
Its slumbering right, remembered, to reclaim.

All bent their heads as musing, and a space
Was past in silence, then the Sire arose,
My father's ancient foe, long reconciled,
Some conference held with neighbours, one by one,
Spoke out for all: "Sire de Joinville," said he,
"I, after council held with all of these,
Thus make reply: Wrong done by thee to us,
By bitter word, harsh deed, or thought unkind,
None know we. All commend thee to the war,
As brother prays for brother; all declare
That he who wrongs thee absent, shall endure
Our direst anger. Thus in God's high name
We bid thee prosper." Then in long embrace
He held me—all applauding, and I passed
From out the hall, 'mid friends that clasped my hands,
And weeping, prayed that God would bless me still.
At the hall door my charger stood, and I
Set fast in stirrups. Next the trumpet brayed;
And by the drawbridge, through the village street,
And down the chestnut avenue we passed,
In helm and mail, our pennons flying free,
Filled with high hopes, and joying in the war.

Since then not once have I beheld my home;
I, who thus write! From Aigues-Mortes we sailed
Within the month. One chance approach there was
Which brought the dim grey towers within my ken.
One only; for, as pilgrims to the shrine
Of good Saint Urban, I with others came
Barefooted, stripped of all pomp, to pray.
But, pilgrim-like, I turned away, nor dared
Even to rest my eyes upon the much-loved home,
For my two sons were still abiding there;
Too dear to me, their father. Had I stayed,
And from the hill across the woods beheld

The turrets of their dwelling, even the vane
Crossing the central keep, my heart had failed
By grief relaxing from its manly strain;
And dull, reluctant, faithless I had gone,
Shaming my king in this most righteous war.

The world that had seemed a happy hunting-ground to Rose Temple appeared now to be overshadowed. Her bright smile was no longer ready to greet Paul or to laugh at his love of ease. The little child-like banter which he always seemed to like and return in his own quiet way, was a thing of the past.

The next morning, when she went to him with the copy of verses in her hand, her serious face and the sadness of her tone as she laid *Joinville* before him struck him.

"Do you think that a good picture of those times, Rose? I always like to hear you read what I write. Read me *Joinville*, and then I shall see if there are any false quantities."

"No," Rose said, "I could not read it."

"Well," he said, "never mind. Take it and read it to—to Miss Ling, and tell me her opinion of it."

But Rose shook her head.

"I think not," she said quickly.

"Then," said Paul, "I shall take it to her myself and read it. Her opinion is worth having. Why, Rose, what is the matter? Are you pining for the Masons? I am not. It is such a relief to feel our house our own again, and that we are all free of espionage; no longer to hear Bee and Bel's perfections chanted. Leamington is welcome to them—tennis, fiddles, intellect, and all. Will

you come to the cottage this afternoon? for I am afraid I should not get admission without you. You are the key, you know, to unlock my gate of paradise. If it had not been for you I should never have had a chance of really knowing Miss Ling."

CHAPTER XI.

SNARED.

AFTER all, Paul thought it better to have Rose's company; and they set out together by the now familiar path across the park to the cottage in Westover.

Mrs. Bolingbroke was in her room, Stephanie had just come downstairs when she saw Paul and Rose at the garden gate. The first impulse was to say she was tired with a sleepless night, for her mother had not given her much respite from poultices and various remedies for the distressing pain in her head.

But her resolution failed when she saw Paul linger a little behind Rose, uncertain of his welcome.

He had been so good to her mother! She told herself she had often been very ungracious to him, and now it would so soon be over, and she would have left Westover never to return. For she had made up her mind that, as soon as it was possible to move her mother, they must again be wanderers, and try to escape the quest which was evidently being made for them by her persecutor.

"Paul has brought you a poem to read," Rose said, trying to hide the pain at her heart from Stephanie. "It is about the gallant Joinville, who, before he left his home for ever, summoned every one to ask them to

forgive him if he had done anything to offend, or hurt, or grieve them," Rose went on hurriedly. "Paul is going to Italy for the winter, and I think he might ask everyone, as Joinville did, whether he had hurt anyone, and get the same sort of answer, don't you?"

"I am glad you are going to Italy, Mr. Grenville," Stephanie said heartily. "I hope you will extend your travels, and see many places, which must have an especial interest for you. Now let us make ourselves comfortable," she said. "You can have mother's chair, Mr. Grenville. I know you like to have lounging-room." She added this with a smile.

"It is you who ought to take rest in that chair, Miss Ling," Paul said; "you look very tired."

"Perhaps I do, for sleepless nights do not suit me; and poor mother had such a bad night of pain, that I could not rest without trying all Dr. Dove's prescriptions by turn. She is asleep now, and Mrs. Samson will call me if she wakes. Now let us hear the poem. I should like to hear it very much."

Stephanie had never been more gracious and delightful, Paul thought. She read his *Joinville*; and, emboldened by success, and elated by Stephanie's approval, he said:

"We are quite alone at Combe Place now, as Rose will have told you, Miss Ling. Now let me persuade you to break through your rules and come and dine with us to-morrow—if Mrs. Ling is better, of course. I should not wish to take you from her if she wanted you."

"I could not possibly leave my mother," Stephanie said; "and besides, I never make an exception to a

general rule. Mrs. Johnstone continually asks me to luncheon, and the rector and his wife to afternoon tea, and Mrs. Dove to both meals together, and I always decline their hospitality; therefore I must decline yours."

"I do wish you would not be so determined," Paul said impatiently. "I believe, after all, you have never forgiven that unhappy 'private grounds' affair, and that is why you never enter our gates."

"I think it is a pity to go over old grievances, Mr. Grenville," Stephanie said; "and you are mistaken in saying I never enter your grounds, though not by the front entrance perhaps. Sometimes I pay the keeper and his wife a visit; and I like to stand on the bridge above the stream, which is like a river now, and watch the trout, and perhaps long for a line. I consider Macdonald has an especial right in this part of your estate, and I don't feel as if I were trespassing there."

Paul felt he was baffled, and became moody and silent, while Rose, seated on a low stool at Stephanie's feet, rested her head against her knee.

They made a pretty picture in the flickering fire-light; and Paul's eye lingered on it with a strange feeling that perhaps very soon that beautiful woman, with her grave, serious eyes, and lovely arched mouth, where sadness, when she was in repose, seemed to have its home, would have passed away from his sight for ever.

Presently Rose said, "If you are coming at all to-night, Paul, you had better make haste; it is getting so dark."

Paul roused himself from his dream, and said, "Very well, I am ready."

Stephanie went with them to the porch, and stood

there as they lingered at the gate. There was a belt of light in the western sky of a deep red colour, and the evening star was hanging like a golden lamp between it and a long line of indigo clouds, melting into violet hues at their edges, which were also faintly touched by the crimson glow. The rest of the sky was still a leaden grey; but the west seemed full of promise that the long spell of rain and mist was over.

"What a lovely bit of sky!" Stephanie said; "I rather envy your walk."

"Come with us. Oh, do come with us!" Rose said. "Just as far as the bridge below Macdonald's house, if no further."

Stephanie hesitated. Ah! how much did that hesitation mean!

"Do come," urged Rose.

But Paul was silent. His eyes were fastened on her beautiful face, which the western glow seemed to clothe with a faint ethereal loveliness as it was turned towards it, with its setting of the dark masses of her rich chestnut hair.

"Do come," Rose said again; and to her surprise Stephanie turned back to the sitting-room, and throwing a white shawl round her, put on a black-straw hat, and said to Mrs. Sampson, who was appearing with the tea-tray:

"Look in on mother, Mrs. Sampson. I have not been out to-day, and I am going to take a stroll for half an hour."

"That's right, my dear young lady. I am glad to hear it. You sit too close at your writing, and it ain't

good for you at your years; you should be amusing yourself, like others of your age."

Stephanie smiled, and said:

"Good-bye, and don't forget mother."

Then the three went away together, and walked up the hill towards the keeper's garden, which opened into the road, through the gate by which Stephanie had once so rashly entered.

As they passed the keeper's cottage, where the fire-light made a pleasant glow through the latticed panes, Rose ran forward and went in, saying:

"I promised Mrs. Macdonald I would go on Sunday, and I must just see if she wants anything from the Combe."

Then Paul and Stephanie were left alone together. Instead of waiting for Rose, as Paul feared and expected, Stephanie walked on through the sweet-scented path amongst the plummy fir trees to the little bridge.

The stream which fed the lake in the grounds of Combe Place, and which was duly fed by many little moorland rills, was now bounding over the stones and boulders with a swift and strong current swelled by recent rains.

There were faint rustlings in the wood, and the sweet liquid song of a late robin was heard, who had not yet gone to rest. There was only a handrail on one side of the little bridge, and as Stephanie put her foot on the plank Paul involuntarily stretched out a protecting hand. Stephanie paused, and leaning on the rail, turned and faced him.

"We had better wait here for Rose," she said.

In all aftertime Paul saw her as she stood before him then—her hat a little fallen back from her head, showing the line of her hair gathered back from her low, square brow.

He felt he had not a moment to lose, his interviews with Stephanie were so few. Rose would be back in a few minutes; it must be now or never. With some prescience of what was coming, Stephanie made a step back towards the wood path, and said:

“Perhaps we had better turn and meet Rose.”

“Stop!” Paul said hurriedly, “I must speak. I want to tell you that from the first moment I saw you, you have been the one absorbing influence of my life. You have awoke me from my dreamy idleness. I long to be like you, and live and work for others. Do not throw me back into the selfish life from which your voice called me. I will do anything, everything you wish, if you will only give me yourself.”

The flood-gates were opened now, and Paul poured forth his very soul in eager, passionate words, pleading as if for dear life. And the seething, rapid water below them seemed to repeat the story as he said:

“I love you! I love you with my whole heart! I see in you one who will help me to higher aims and a higher life. Oh, do not turn away from me!”

Stephanie was greatly moved. The woman’s heart within her awoke, and there was something there whispering of peace and love, and protection from all the haunting fears which shadowed her life. After a pause she said, in a low, gentle voice:

“I am so sorry it has come to this, so very sorry.

You do not know to whom you are speaking, or anything about me."

"I know that I love you, and that I am unworthy to ask for your love in return. I know you are living in a cottage, when a palace would be more fitting for you," he said vehemently. "What do I want to know more? Do I not know you by your conversation on subjects which have never before deeply moved me, or moved me at all? Do I not know you by your sweet graciousness to Rose, by your noble independence of feeling, which makes you use your gifts to provide for your mother's comfort? Yes, I know you, and I love you; and I am proud to know and love you."

There is always something in the confession of a pure and noble love which raises the man who makes it above his ordinary level. The spoiled child of his father's old age, the dilatory young dreamer, who lay back in the boat as it rocked to and fro amongst the water lilies, and left Rose to do the work on that August afternoon, vanished. In his place Stephanie seemed to see a man of higher aims and aspirations, who spoke honestly from the fulness of his heart, and pleaded for her love as a man in sore straits pleads for life.

"I know you, and I love you."

He repeated the words, and Stephanie answered sadly:

"Alas! that you should love me, and that I must only say you do *not* know me. This is only a passing feeling, Mr. Grenville," she said, as he eagerly interrupted her; "at least, let me hope so."

"It is *not* passing or transitory, it is eternal," he

said. "Give me the answer I desire, and say you will try to care for me. Only *try* to care," he repeated—"only try!"

There was no time for more. Rose came running down the wood path to the bridge.

"It is getting so dark," she said, "and I found Mrs. Macdonald alone. Macdonald was out, and had left her with no lamp lighted, and the little maid had gone on an errand to the village. So I lighted the lamp. I really must scold Macdonald for leaving his poor wife alone like that. Did you think I was never coming?"

Then Paul and Stephanie's silence seemed suddenly to strike her. She stopped; and when they were a few paces from the bridge Stephanie turned.

"I must say good-bye here," she said, "and good-night."

Then she put her arm round Rose's slight figure, and drawing her towards her kissed her, even with what seemed to Rose unwonted tenderness; and in another moment her white shawl was gleaming in the gathering shadows, as she retraced her steps to the bridge.

Stephanie stood midway on the plank, with her hand clasping the rail. The rapid little river rushed beneath her, and seemed to tell a story of eager haste to reach some promised goal. And Stephanie exclaimed aloud:

"I wish it had not come to this. I have tried to prevent it. I have given him no encouragement. I have even been discourteous at times, as poor mother has told me. Oh, why—why is it that I am so sorely tried—always tried? Poor Paul! And poor little Rose! But he will turn to her again when I have passed out

of sight. Perhaps I may never see him again, never speak to him again; for we must not delay. I feel that there is danger in delay."

She had delayed too long, alas! too long; for, as the words passed her lips, suddenly a dark figure appeared at the further end of the bridge, the plank creaked under a heavy tread, while the rail against which Stephanie leaned quivered.

"Ah, I have found you at last! Did you think I should fail, my proud beauty? Not I. Albert Hardman is not one to fail. A clever scheme yours was, getting your brother off to the docks. But I've scented out the whole story; money will do anything"—he laid his heavy large hand on hers—"but let bygones be bygones if you will be my wife. Come now, not a word will I breathe of what's over and done with. What was the paltry fifty pounds to *me*? Why, bless you, it was not worth a thought."

He had grasped her cold hand now; the large diamond on his little finger caught the waning light as he did so, and flashed and sparkled.

"Come," he said, in a soft, coaxing voice, and bringing his face unpleasantly near hers, "come, my queen, I'll give you a place as fine as this. I will!"

"Let me go!" she exclaimed. "I gave you an answer long ago; I will never give you any other. It is mean, it is cowardly, to attack a defenceless woman like this. Let me pass, I say!"

"If I let you go," he said in a slow, husky voice, "I will go up to yonder great house, and tell those who live there that you have a brother who is a thief, that you aided and abetted his escape to another country,

that you connived at his wickedness. Yes, and I'll tell them that your father had not been what we should call altogether straight and square in his notions of honesty. The master of Combe Place won't be best pleased to see his son making a fool of himself with a thief's sister! I have been standing within earshot; I have heard all that was said; and I swear I will go and tell them, there's not a pin to choose between you and your brother. But if you give me your word that you will marry me, I will go off to Exeter, get a special license, and take you to the church yonder before I am two days older. Now then, yes or no? If you say no, you will repent it to your latest day. Now then!"

Stephanie's high courage nearly failed her. She was in the hands of the man she feared and detested. Macdonald's cottage was beyond the sound of her voice if she called out to summon him, and if she called for help it would show Mr. Hardman how terror-struck she was.

"Come now," he said again in the soft, suave tones which were even more distasteful to her than his loud-voiced threats—"come now. I'll give you anything short of the moon if you'll only marry me. If you care for art you shall have a gallery of pictures, with learned folk to talk to about books and music. I can command it all. Money is a fine thing, especially when money means sixty thousand pounds a year, with a chance of making it seventy. Not bad—not bad, is it now?"

Stephanie rallied herself once more for a final effort. She strove in desperation to speak calmly.

"Mr. Hardman, do not press me thus. I have paid back the money—my poor brother's debt to you. Only

forget him; yes, forgive and forget. You did not lose the money. I know this does not alter his sin against you, but you did not lose the money."

"Stuff! Money! It's not the paltry money, it's *you* I want. Say you'll marry me, or take the consequences."

"I will *not* marry you," she said. "I would rather die, if it be God's will."

"But if I say you *shall* marry me, what then?"

Then he threw a strong arm round her as she struggled to get free, and clinging to the rail of the bridge she raised her voice and cried in ringing tones:

"Help! Help!"

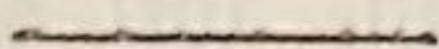
Then just as her strength was failing, and her hold on the rail giving way, another figure appeared. A man leaped upon the bridge, and a voice cried, "Leave go, you scoundrel. These are my grounds; you are trespassing. I will have you taken to the police station. Macdonald, here! Macdonald!" But the keeper was not within call. It was nearly dark, and the solemn fir trees looked like tall spectres. The river rushed on with the same noisy babble, and a sudden gust of wind sent a shower of rain drops from the branches above the bridge. Even in that supreme moment Stephanie noticed this, and the trivial things around her. When that evening came back to her memory with all its dreadful reality, she recalled how a living creature, probably a water rat, ran past from the long rank grasses by the water's edge, making a sharp rustle as it went. She recalled the rush of the river, and the moan in the tree tops, and the great splash of rain which the wind sent against her face.

"You scoundrel!" Paul's hand was at Mr. Hardman's throat. "Unhand the lady at once."

"Ha, ha! you don't like it; you want her for a wife, do you? She won't bring you much honour, she is the daughter of a dishonourable bankrupt and the sister of a young thief, who rewarded my kindness by cheating and robbing me. You don't like to hear this, eh, my fair lady, do you?"

All this time Mr. Hardman had never loosened his hold of Stephanie. Paul's hand had a tight grasp on his collar, and the sensation of choking was not very pleasant.

With a mighty effort he tried to jerk himself free, and then the slight rail cracked and cracked, and all three were precipitated into the rushing, gurgling stream below!



CHAPTER XII.

NIGHT WATCHES.

DINNER was laid for three at Combe Place that evening, and when the gong sounded for the second time only Sir John and Rose were in the drawing-room.

Sir John glanced at the clock.

"Where is Paul?" he asked.

"I do not know, Uncle John; he turned back to give some order to Macdonald as we were coming through the plantation, and I came home without him."

"Turned back to Laurel Cottage more likely, than to give Macdonald orders. Rose, he is making himself ridiculous about that young woman, and so are you, Rose."

"She is so beautiful and so different from all the rest of the world, Uncle John. I do love her, and I know you would like her."

"Nonsense! I don't like wonderful women, different from the rest of the world as you say. I like women 'not too bright or good for human nature's daily food.' Wordsworth knew what he was writing about when he wrote that, Rose. You suit his picture well enough, a great deal better than my lady trespasser."

"I wish you would not call Stephanie that ugly name, Uncle John. She has had so many troubles, and bears them so bravely, so grandly."

"Pooh! Some folks like to coin troubles, and hand them about to their friends to get sympathy. You are so easily won, little Rose; you have a tender heart, my dear."

Rose shook her head.

"No, Uncle John. I do not care so much for people generally. I like them well enough, but I do not feel as I feel about Stephanie. Paul has been quite different since he knew her; he is getting his poems ready for the publisher, and he is going about a great deal with Mr. Watson, that he may really understand the working of the estate."

"Well, well, let us go to dinner. I wish Paul would add punctuality to his list of virtues. I never mean to dine later than seven. I've dined at six in my young days, and seven is late enough. Paul can dine at eight or half-past if he likes, when I am dead."

Though the gong had sounded some minutes before, the butler had not announced dinner.

"He is waiting for Paul," Rose thought. "I daresay he rushed up to dress in a great hurry." The next moment the door was opened, and the old butler's ghastly face made Rose exclaim:

"Are you ill, Thomas? Are you ill?"

"Miss Temple, Miss Rose, come—come here. Don't let the master hear."

Rose followed the old servant with a beating heart and trembling limbs.

"Oh, Miss Rose, Miss Rose! Mr. Paul!"

Rose closed the door gently behind her; her first thought was for Sir John.

"What is it, Thomas?"

"There has been an accident. The bridge has broke down in the plantation. They are bringing in Mr. Paul and the lady; they think Mr. Paul is—is dead."

The drawing-room door behind her opened, and Sir John appeared with a big shawl thrown across his shoulders, a protection from draughts he always used, when going from one room to another.

"What's amiss? Is anything wrong?"

"Dear Uncle John," Rose said, "go back into the drawing-room, and let me go and enquire the truth. Thomas thinks there has been an accident, and Paul is hurt."

Sir John staggered, and would have fallen, had not Rose caught his arm and guided him to the nearest chair. Then with the strength that often comes to the weakest in the hour of dire need, Rose went down the few wide stairs to the hall below.

She was just in time to see Macdonald coming in, bearing in his stalwart arms Paul's insensible form. Tears were streaming down the old keeper's face, for he had loved Paul from a child, had taught him to handle his first gun, and had taken him with him in many a tramp to cover.

Behind Macdonald were two other men carrying Stephanie, who was also insensible; and both she and the heir of Combe Place were laid upon the deep couches, covered with rich dark velvet, which were placed against the walls of the warm, well-lighted hall.

"There's another, Miss Rose; but he was so heavy," Macdonald said, "the fellows could not carry him so far, and he lies at my house. They have sent for

Dr. Dove. Oh, Miss Rose, Miss Rose, my dear!" For poor Rose, terror-struck as she was, was struggling to repress her cries, and was sobbing convulsively.

"Don't say he is dead, Macdonald. Oh, dear Macdonald, don't say he is dead!" she exclaimed, as she stood gazing at Paul's rigid face.

And the lady—"the beautiful lady," one of the maid-servants said—she makes no sign of life; she is like a waxen image. Rose felt a sudden stab of shy reproach. So entirely had she been engrossed with Paul's condition, she had forgotten Stephanie. And now the crowd of assembled servants gave way as Sir John came feebly and slowly into the hall.

"How did this happen?" he asked in a low, broken voice.

"I don't know, Sir John; no one knows. All three of them must have been on the bridge, and the rail gave way. There was a scuffle, for Barton, who was coming by that way, heard a cry for help. The water is in no ways deep, Sir John, they may come round yet. The lady is coming round already. The other party must have hit his head against a stone, for he has a big wound in his forehead."

"What other? What other?" Sir John asked.

Then he smote his hands together, and in the helplessness of age and infirmity cried:

"Will no one try to save my son, my son, my only son. Oh, would to God that woman had never come near the place, she has caused all this misery!"

A pair of large, sorrowful eyes were now raised with a look of returning intelligence to Sir John's face. The ears that had been dull in the first moment of return-

ing consciousness were sharpened now as Sir John, moaning heavily, said:

"Yes, she has caused all this misery. May God forgive her, for I never can."

"Ah, me! it is true—too true!" Stephanie murmured. "Let me go," she said piteously; "let me go to my mother, please."

Then she struggled to her feet, but soon fell back again exhausted.

The arrival of Dr. Dove and of another country practitioner, who had been caught on his rounds, was the signal for the servants to disperse.

Beds were speedily prepared, and baths heated, while the usual means were taken to restore Paul to consciousness.

Before midnight other doctors had arrived, who had been sent for from the nearest towns, and their efforts were crowned with success, though there was still some anxiety felt for Paul.

The doctors feared he might have sustained some injury in his fall, but there were good hopes he might rally.

It was in the grey dawn of the morning that Stephanie rose and dressed herself with trembling hands.

The maid who had been deputed to watch in her room was sound asleep in her chair, and the fire was burning low. Stephanie's wet clothes had been dried, and were hung before the fire ready for her. They were stiff and hard, but Stephanie put them on in haste, and then throwing the soft striped rug from the bed round her, she slipped out of the room. She had no place in this house. She had brought the others,

as the poor sorrow-stricken father had said, nothing but woe and misery, and they should never look on her face again.

As Stephanie passed noiselessly down the corridor she saw the door of one of the rooms partly open, and passed by it.

It was the dressing-room which opened from Paul's bedroom. On a sofa lay Rose, her cheek pillowed by her hand, and her face stained with tears. It was the "sleeping for sorrow" which had come to her after all the anxiety and grief through which she had passed, and Stephanie gazed longingly upon her.

"Sweet little Rose," she whispered. "Dear child, he will come to love you in time as you deserve, and you will make him happy *if* he lives. Ah, what an 'if' is that! And how am I to know how he is? Who will tell me? He may die, and I shall not know! Oh, that I could look at him once more! Once more—and for the last time!"

Then, urged by an irresistible impulse, Stephanie passed into the further room. Here too the watchers slept. Sir John, covered with rugs, was breathing heavily in an arm-chair, his head thrown back, his face wearing the appearance of extreme old age. The hours of agonizing suspense through which he had passed had left their mark. He looked as if ten years had been added to the seventy he had already told out. The threescore years and ten were suddenly turned into fourscore.

Paul lay upon the bed, and by his side a doctor was sitting. He was a stranger at Combe Place. Dr. Dove

had been summoned to Macdonald's cottage, and had left this man in charge.

He looked up to see, and saw a tall figure standing on the opposite side of the bed, enveloped in a many-coloured rug, which was thrown over her shoulders. Stephanie's hair fell in damp masses over her, reaching far below her waist; and the doctor never forgot the expression on that finely-chiselled face, as white as marble fresh from the sculptor's hand.

Afraid of rousing his patient, the doctor, with one hand on Paul's wrist, raised the other as if in warning, but he did not speak.

Stephanie stood for a few moments looking down on Paul, and a quick, short sob escaped her. Then she laid her soft white hand gently on the pale brow, and murmured:

"God bless you!"

At the same instant Paul's heavy eyelids were raised, and he gazed up at Stephanie's face and smiled the smile as of one in sleep, and not the smile of consciousness of a present reality. Then the tall figure glided noiselessly away, as it had come, and the doctor hardly felt sure whether he had been awake or dreaming.

"It was like a vision," he thought. "I shall never feel quite sure whether I was awake or not."

When Dr. Dove and the other doctors held a consultation at eight o'clock, Paul's condition was pronounced satisfactory, and though he was very weak, and had received some external injuries by the fall, they were not dangerous.

It was not till the evening that he fully realized what had happened.

When Dr. Dove came to pay his last visit for that night, and to give his orders and directions to the nurse, who had been summoned from Exeter, Paul said:

“Who sat up with me last night, Dr. Dove?”

“Mr. Karslake, the young doctor who has lately come to Lustleigh.”

“Was anyone else here?”

“Sir John was asleep in the chair by the fire, and Miss Temple was in the next room.”

“But someone else was here. Miss Ling was here. She came and stood by my bed, and I heard her voice.

“Dr. Dove, tell me, was it a vision, and does it mean that she has passed away from the world? Tell me!”

“Miss Ling is with her mother. I have seen her to-day, and though very much shaken and distressed in mind, I think she will recover after a few days’ rest.”

“I knew she came to me, I felt her hand on my forehead. I thought she said, ‘God bless you.’ I wish I knew.”

“It is possible Miss Ling came, for she appears to have left the house very early in the morning, and she might come to inquire for you first.”

“Did she walk back to Laurel Cottage alone?” Paul asked feverishly. “Did she? She must not be allowed to go about alone. That dreadful man will persecute her, will seize her. Please take care Miss Ling is not allowed to walk alone.”

“You need not be afraid of any persecution from that man, he is dying in Macdonald’s cottage; he may linger for a few hours or even days, but he cannot recover.”

Paul turned away his head, and said no more. Rescued from the greatest peril himself, he dared scarcely acknowledge that he rejoiced in the death of another, even if that other was the cruel persecutor of the woman he loved and honoured.

It was scarcely the same Stephanie who came back to her mother in that chill grey morning of late autumn. For so long the daughter had been the strong one on whom her mother leaned, and now the condition seemed reversed; for Stephanie fell sobbing on her knees by her mother's bed, where she had passed a weary, sleepless night, and clasping her in her arms, murmured:

"Oh, mother, mother, comfort me; I am so miserable!"

Then that true maternal sympathy and tenderness, which are like nothing else in this sad world, was poured out on the stricken daughter; for however a mother's love may seem to fade as childhood is left behind, and womanhood asserts itself, it is often only in seeming.

In prosperity this relationship may be subject to jars, and there may be division of interests, and circumstances may tend to the drifting apart of those who in childish days had been inseparable. This seems to us sad at times, and indeed it is sad; but if in prosperity there is a dividing gulf, adversity and sorrow soon bridge it over.

Mrs. Bolingbroke's health had been, as we know, weak. Stephanie had never had a day's illness. Mrs. Bolingbroke was crushed by the sorrow out of which Stephanie had bravely risen; she had left everything to Stephanie with the utmost confidence that she would

do what was right, and only about poor Aubrey had she made any resistance to her wishes. Mrs. Bolingbroke submitted, but it was not a cheerful submission, and patiently had Stephanie borne a continual wailing over the irreparable past and the separation from her boy, which she could not help sometimes telling poor Stephanie she might have prevented. Through all the deep trials of the past year the mother had leaned on the daughter, had wondered at her courage and powers, and had sometimes fretfully complained that she was so different from her, that she could not understand her.

But now, when Stephanie came half broken-hearted to her mother's bed, and wept out her grief as when she was a little child, all the love and protecting tenderness of those early years sprang to life, and Stephanie's cry of, "Oh, mother, comfort me!" showed that if the need was sore the comfort was ready.

"As one whom his mother comforteth." Which of us has not felt the full force of those words, and recognised their truth? Perhaps never so fully as when the mother who loved us, and to whom we have gone with the trials of maturer years as with the little sorrows of childhood, is taken from us, and we look in vain for her tender sympathy.

There are alas! a few women in whom the maternal instinct is dead; a few who are apparently utterly without it, who leave their children to pass a cold, joyless childhood, who pursue their own way, and let their children go on theirs unnoticed, except to complain if dress, or personal appearance, or behaviour are not precisely what they approve. Women who repress affection or its demonstration, and who depute others

to provide the little birthday festivities which are always remembered in happy homes as the red letter days of childhood.

Women who think more of their own dress and the appointments of their home, or their literary or artistic efforts, than of their children, and who pursue their course apart from them. There are such women, perhaps we can all point to one amongst our acquaintance, but they are but few; and poor Mrs. Bolingbroke, with all her weaknesses and faults, was not amongst them; the mother's heart beat true, and when Stephanie wanted her she was ready.

Thoroughly worn out and exhausted, Stephanie suffered herself to be laid upon the bed by her mother's side, and there in broken accents she told the awful story of the previous evening.

Mrs. Sampson mingled her tears with those of her lodgers, and did all she could to show her sympathy.

"I should like to write to Mr. Middleton and Mr. Swifte, mother," Stephanie said the next morning. "If only I could see Mr. Middleton. I wonder if he would come; he would understand so well; he would help me to see some light, to find some comfort. Oh," she said, clasping her hands, "think of the misery I have caused! think of the sorrow, and I meant to do what is right, mother."

"My darling, you have done what was right. You have been sinned against grievously, my poor child. Oh, Stephanie, take comfort!"

But Stephanie could not be comforted. She lay watching the door, expecting news of those who were ill, and longing to know how it was with Rose.

Then she asked Mrs. Sampson to bring her well-worn case and a pen, and, propped up in bed, she wrote with a feeble hand a few words to Mr. Middleton:

"I am in great trouble. Can you come and see me? I am ill in body and mind. There is no need now to call me anything but

"STEPHANIE BOLINGBROKE."

She was so exhausted after writing this that Mrs. Bolingbroke took upon herself to write to Mr. Swifte, and it was touching to see the efforts the mother made to do what was necessary. She rose and dressed, while Stephanie lay with large wistful eyes watching her, quite passive, and making no remonstrance about her mother's unwonted exertion.

Dr. Dove came and brought the news that Paul was feverish and excitable, but not in immediate danger; that Rose sent Stephanie her love, and she was to take care of herself, and try to get well soon. About the other invalid Stephanie did not enquire, but Dr. Dove mentioned him almost incidentally. If he suspected that there was a mystery connected with the great rough man, who was reduced to the weakness of a child, and lay dying in Macdonald's cottage, he did not make any remarks on it. He merely said, "A physician from London and a surgeon have been telegraphed for to consult about Mr. Hardman, but his case is hopeless. He has received an injury to the spine, and it is only a question of days. His mother, poor soul, is to arrive to-night."

His mother! Stephanie recalled how kind and

gentle the old woman was to her on the day of her visit at Lancaster Gate. She turned her face away without speaking, and Mrs. Bolingbroke said nothing to her about Dr. Dove's information.

Thus three days passed, and on the evening of the third Mr. Middleton arrived.

Stephanie had left her bed now, and, wan and languid, was seated in a chair by the little lattice casement in the small room which opened from her mother's.

Mr. Middleton was startled at the change in her. The spirit and life seemed to have died out of her; and she looked up at him with a piteous, entreating gaze, saying, "Why am I so tried? Why has God suffered all I have done—and indeed I have tried to do right—to end like this?"

Mr. Middleton answered:

"Daisy sent you her love; and I was to be sure to ask you to remember some words which have comforted her since God's hand has been bearing upon her."

"What are the words?" Stephanie asked.

"'Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth.'"

"I *can't* feel it," Stephanie said, "oh, I can't feel it! It is the dreadful thought that I have been the cause of sorrow to others. Do you know what Sir John said that first night? I heard him say it. The words seem to be burned into my brain—'That woman has caused all this sorrow. God may forgive her, but I never can.'"

"But his son is given back to him," Mr. Middleton said. "He will feel differently now,"

"No, he will not; for you know his son, Paul Grenville, asked me to be his wife. That is what his father could never, never forgive."

"Time works wonders," Mr. Middleton said. "All the worst troubles pass; and the things which have seemed to us intolerable, and burdens too heavy to be borne, vanish. We leave them behind on the pathway of life, and look back and sometimes wonder how we could have been so overcome and cast down by them."

"I shall never look back on this time and feel as you say. You forget that the man who pursued me is dying. Think of that, and by my means!"

"I cannot allow you to say that. He seems to have been alone responsible for what has happened. It was a cowardly act to waylay you. He is, poor man, reaping the consequences of his own misdoings."

"I want you to pray for him," Stephanie said. "Will you help me to do so? And do pray for me."

Mr. Middleton was with Stephanie for some time. What passed in the stillness of that little room need not be written here. Such seasons are sacred; but Mr. Middleton led Stephanie to the great Physician of souls, and the bitterness of those past few days grew less bitter, and something like peace came.

Mr. Middleton was a great comfort to both mother and daughter, and he kindly stayed in the village to be at hand if he was wanted, and arranged to have his duty taken at Torquay for Sunday. Mr. Daniels made him his guest at the Rectory, and it was there that Mr. Middleton learned much of what had passed since Stephanie came to Laurel Cottage; how she had been

loved in the village; how she had been ready to do any service; and how they all felt that they had a very unusual person amongst them. Of course, Paul's attentions to her had not escaped notice, and gossip had begun to be rife about it.

For Sir John Grenville's son higher things were expected than a marriage with a lady, however beautiful, about whom some mystery seemed to linger, and who was evidently without any of this world's riches to bring to the heir of Combe Place.

Mr. Swifte answered his summons, and went backwards and forwards between Laurel Cottage and Macdonald's.

The first London physicians and surgeons also came again and one of the surgeons' assistants remained to watch the condition of Mr. Hardman.

There was literally nothing to be done. Paralysis, the result of his fall against one of the large boulders in the stream, crept slowly but surely on. No human power could avail; and the money which was able to command every possible alleviation, was powerless to do more than provide everything that the doctors thought necessary, and devised for his comfort.

The little moorland village, and indeed the whole neighbourhood, was roused into a state of interest and curiosity.

It seemed that a chapter of a romance had been enacted amongst them, and that as yet no clue had been found to solve the mystery which evidently surrounded the beautiful Miss Ling, who had attracted notice and won love from poor and rich.

There is always a sort of pleasurable excitement

mingled with sympathy, which is caused by an accident happening to anyone who lives in a narrow circle. In great cities hundreds are taken to hospitals every day. Some die before they reach their shelter; others lie, as Mr. Hardman lay, lingering between life and death for days—unnoticed, and perhaps unknown.

And even had Mr. Hardman been lying in his own London mansion, Lancaster Gate, with the great doctor's carriage at his door, he would not have excited a tithe of the general interest and sympathy which he awoke in the people about him, as he lay in the keeper's cottage in the Combe Place plantation.

It was Sunday evening, the 29th evening of October. Mr. Middleton had read the prayers and lessons for Mr. Daniels in the morning, and had in a voice which betrayed deep emotion asked the prayers of the church for Stephanie Bolingbroke, Paul Grenville, and Albert Hardman.

Such a strange association of those three names, and they had struck upon the ears of all who heard them! But after a pause Mr. Middleton added, "Albert Hardman is lying hopelessly ill."

In the afternoon Mr. Middleton preached. He took the words of his text from the Psalms for the twenty-ninth evening of the month. The late October day closed in early, and the greater part of the little church was in dim shadow. A few candles were lighted in the chancel, and two in the pulpit. When Mr. Middleton stood there, he looked round, and in a far corner, near the door, he saw a dark figure kneeling, with clasped hands, and her face hidden. Surely it must be Stephanie! He knew she had been downstairs in

her usual place in the little sitting-room that morning, but she had been so weak and exhausted that Dr. Dove had told Mr. Middleton he thought she had not by any means recovered from the shock, and begged him to use his influence to get her away as soon as possible from a place which was so full of painful associations.

Then, when Mr. Middleton had repeated to Stephanie what Dr. Dove said, she had shuddered. "No, I cannot go yet, not yet; let me be quiet, please, till I know how it is with him. Pray for him, that he may be forgiven," she said as he left the room.

But when the bell had ceased for service in this still autumn afternoon, Stephanie had suddenly risen to her feet, and said to her mother, "I think I shall go to church."

"No, Stephanie, no. My dear child, you are not fit for it; you can scarcely stand."

"I must go!" she said. "Let me go, mother. Mrs. Sampson will get me a cloak and my hat."

She rang the little tinkling bell as she spoke, and Mrs. Sampson came bustling in, and very reluctantly did what Stephanie asked.

"You must take my arm, my dear, then. I wouldn't go, if I was you."

"I can walk as far as the church," Stephanie said, with a sad smile, "but not to the moor, Mrs. Sampson."

Then she kissed her mother, and the kind woman went with her to the gate, watching her slow, languid steps as she passed out of sight to the church.

"Dear heart! she is altered," Mrs. Sampson said; "she is like a flower that has been crushed; she'll never be the same again."

Mr. Middleton's voice seemed to rouse Stephanie; he saw her rise from her knees, and he delivered his message, almost feeling that the message was for her alone.

"Turn our captivity, O Lord, as the rivers in the south." "They that sow in tears shall reap in joy." "He that now goeth on his way weeping, and beareth forth good seed, shall doubtless come again with joy, bringing his sheaves with him."

The words were in themselves words of cheer, and they were pressed home by the power of the preacher. He had that gift, which but few possess, of throwing new light on old subjects. No one who listened to him could doubt for an instant that he himself had drunk deep from the wells of salvation.

The little congregation, accustomed to one preacher year after year, were suddenly arrested. Mrs. Johnstone, and even the heedless Pussie, were touched in an inexplicable manner.

Mr. Middleton traced the steps of those who had gone on their way weeping, through the long, long ages which lay between the time when David sang this song for their comfort and the present day. Mr. Middleton brought home before the eyes of his listeners, with wonderful word-painting, those who had come before and those who had come after our blessed Master. He had gone on His way, passing through an agony which tears could not relieve, and by His patience and His victory over sin He had assured the victory of His faithful children. Let no one then be faint-hearted if good seed is borne in faith, in the path which the Lord has marked out. Such faithful ones shall surely come

again with joy, bringing their sheaves with them. "We are not to question," Mr. Middleton said, "why we have been so baffled, so sorely disappointed, so beaten down, while we have been striving to sow good seed, and have tried to do our best. If we press onward we shall 'come again' with joy, and the harvest will be golden; if not here, hereafter, when we shall no longer see through a glass darkly, but face to face." Mr. Middleton ended his sermon with the words of one who, he said, had worked in the harvest-field as few had worked, who never faltered, and never turned back on the way, however painful, however weary.

"As a servant earnestly desireth the shadow," she had written above the beautiful words with which he would close his sermon:

"The harvest is lying golden in the heat of the summer sun,
The reapers are binding the corn sheaves, and wishing their work
was done.

Through the glare of the scorching noontide, they will reap with
what strength they may;

But they long with an earnest longing for the shadowy close of
day.

"They were heard in the early morning, when courage and hope
were strong,

They will labour on till the twilight, but the hours are hot and
long;

For the brave, willing hearts are tired, and toil-worn the reapers'
hands,

And the gleaners follow wearily through all the harvest lands.

"But the Master will come in the gloaming, when all the reaping
is done,

He will walk through the quiet corn-fields, and speak to each
weary one.

They will tell Him the long day's story, and their labours will
then seem nought,
For the sake of the joy and gladness, the sight of His face has
brought."*

"Surely," Mr. Middleton said, after a short impressive pause, "surely if we come again with that joy, the promise I have read from this evening's Psalm will be abundantly fulfilled. May God in His mercy bring every one of us out of the shadows to rejoice in the light of His face, as seen in our Lord Jesus Christ."

* This poem is taken from the published *Essays and Poems* by Frances Mary Owen.

CHAPTER XIII.

"YES, I FORGIVE YOU."

MR. MIDDLETON went up to Macdonald's cottage after taking Stephanie home, and inquired for Mr. Hardman.

"The poor gentleman's mother, sir," Mrs. Macdonald said, "is so anxious to see Miss Ling. Poor old lady! It goes to my heart to see her grief. She is so terribly upset. She is quite of the homely sort, like one of ourselves, sir; and the gentleman has been a good son to her."

"How is he this evening?"

"He is dying, sir. Will you ask Miss Ling to come?"

"I do not think she could bear the emotion it would cause," Mr. Middleton said. "I have just taken her home from church, and she is terribly exhausted."

"Well, sir," Mrs. Macdonald said, "he does call for her in a pitiful way; and his mother said to me just now, 'Send for the young lady, or it will be too late.' She never leaves his side, and he just clings to her and says, 'Bring her to me before I die.' He means Miss Ling, as we call her, though I hear she has another name."

As Mr. Middleton was talking to Mrs. Macdonald

in her little parlour, the door opened gently, and Mrs. Hardman came in.

"Oh, sir, fetch Miss Bolingbroke at once, or my poor son will be gone, sir. You are kind and good, I know. Do not refuse me, pray, pray, do not. He has something he wants to say to her. He wants her to forgive him."

Mr. Middleton still hesitated, but the poor mother's distress was so great that he promised to see what he could do.

In Stephanie's present state it seemed almost too much to ask her to stand face to face with the man who had followed her with such relentless persecution; still, what if he refused the poor mother's urgent entreaties? What if before day dawned her son was dead? his last wish ungratified?

Mr. Middleton walked back to the cottage, and to his great relief saw Dr. Dove talking to Mrs. Sampson in the porch.

"Shall I tell Miss Bolingbroke that this man wants to see her?" Mr. Middleton asked. "Will the task be too great?"

"I think I would tell her of the man's desire, and leave her to decide. I have just seen her. She looks better this evening. She tells me she has been to the service, and that she feels stronger.

"Mrs. Ling—or Bolingbroke, as we have to learn to call her now—is in her room upstairs, so you will find her daughter alone."

Mr. Middleton went into the sitting-room, and in five minutes he came out with Stephanie leaning on his arm.

When they reached Macdonald's cottage Stephanie stopped, and, looking up to Mr. Middleton, said:

"I do dread it! oh, I do dread it so!"

"You must pray for God's help to bear it. I think you are right in your decision. You cannot refuse a dying man."

"No!" Stephanie exclaimed; "no! But stop one minute. Give me time."

Presently she said, "I am ready now," and then she walked slowly into Mrs. Macdonald's sitting-room.

"I am glad you are come, my dear young lady; very glad. Sit down a minute and rest."

"No, I am ready now. Where is his mother?"

Mrs. Hardman had heard voices, and now came to the top of the little staircase. It was not their first meeting, and both remembered the last.

"My son is dying," said the poor woman, "my only son, and he was always good to me."

There was something in Mrs. Hardman's tone, more than in the words themselves, which seemed to imply, "If it had not been for you my son would not be lying there."

There are bitter moments, which some of us know too well, when we feel that we have been the cause of sorrow and pain by an act which, though we know it was done from the best and highest motives, has brought about what seem the saddest consequences.

Like a swift flash of lightning the thought rushed through Stephanie's mind, as she felt Mrs. Hardman's cold hand in hers, that if she had yielded to her son's entreaties, if she had married him, all would have been changed. There would have been no trouble at Combe

Place, no banishment for her brother, no concealment for her mother, no terrible accident, which had cost one man his life and endangered that of another, also an only son, and the heir of a fair estate, and inheritor of an old name. But, like a still, small voice sounding above the surging storm of doubts and fears Stephanie seemed to hear the words, "It would have been a sin against God and against yourself to marry a man you could not even respect, much less love!" and then she followed Mrs. Hardman into the room.

The change in Mr. Hardman's appearance was so great, that when Stephanie found herself standing by the bed where he lay, she could at first hardly realize that it was he.

All the surroundings, in their homely simplicity, helped to make the change more striking. The open casement, round which the rose tendrils were wreathed; the white muslin curtains, gathered back from the window; the small iron bedstead, with chintz hangings; the mahogany chest of drawers, and the little looking-glass placed on them.

All the gilded grandeur of the house in Lancaster Gate seemed suddenly to come before Stephanie—as sharp contrasts do come before us, even in trivial matters, in solemn times like this; for it was a solemn time.

Mr. Hardman began to speak when he saw Stephanie, but his voice sounded far away, and his utterance was thick and his sentences disjointed. To Stephanie's surprise what he said did not refer to her.

"It's a nice little place. I know that, but I'm going away to London to make my fortune. I'll make it,

mother, never fear, and you shall come and live along with me when I've got a grand one made. I won't shirk you because I'm a rich man."

"He thinks he is at our old home down in Suffolk," his mother said, weeping, as he went on—

"Yes, there's a good crop of strawberries this year, and what a lot of roses! Yes, the old fellow is a clever gardener, but I should never take to it. I want—I want money—to be a rich man, and—ah! what do you say?"

"Albert dear, you wished to see Miss Bolingbroke. She is come; she is here. You know you sent for her."

"I—I thought she was drowned. We all went into that water together. There, I wish you'd stop it, buzzing and gurgling in my ears; it's enough to make me mad—rushing and roaring—it—stop it, can't you?"

Suddenly a gleam of full recognition came into those dull eyes. He looked up at Stephanie, and said, "I can't do you any harm now. Come nearer, come nearer. There's an awful weight on my chest. Come nearer."

Stephanie obeyed, and stood looking down on the man whom she had last seen in that desperate encounter on the bridge, when his eyes with a fierce, wild light looked into hers, and his strong arm was round her.

"Now, then, say you forgive me."

"Yes," Stephanie said. "Yes, I forgive you; and I am, *oh*, so sorry for you!"

The divine pity that filled her womanly heart shone on her beautiful face, and the next words came with difficulty:

"You never looked like that at me before—never. Now hearken. Take care of my dear old mother. I had my lawyer here yesterday, and all goes to her and to you—all! I've no son—no, neither chick nor child. And tell that boy, your brother, that I forgive him. I say, I cheated my first master. I robbed him of twenty pounds—a fortune to me then. I was never found out; but I think that's why my money has been a curse and not a blessing to anyone. I leave it all to you. Make it a blessing, that's all."

Stephanie was utterly unable to answer him. She sank down on her knees by the bed; and following the impulse of all our poor human hearts in sore distress, she prayed a prayer familiar to our lips—so familiar, that we scarcely heed it as it passes them.

"In all time of our tribulation, in the hour of death and in the day of judgment, good Lord deliver us."

"Again, again! Say it again!" came from the lips so soon to be for ever silent.

And Stephanie repeated with even greater earnestness, "In the hour of death and in the day of judgment, good Lord deliver us. O Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us, and grant us Thy peace."

By a sign and a feeble outstretching of his hand, the dying man showed he wanted his mother to come near.

"Take care of her," he murmured, "and forgive me. Promise."

"I promise," Stephanie said, "I promise."

And he added, "Make the money a blessing."

"I will try! oh, I will try! Say the prayer after me."

And again in broken accents Stephanie said those pleading words; and like a dull echo, as from the borders of another world, they were repeated. In another minute Mr. Middleton had led her gently away.

The time of convalescence dragged wearily on at Combe Place. Paul reached a certain point on his way to recovery, and then made no further progress. He was moody and silent, and Rose's efforts to amuse him and rouse him seemed in vain. She persevered bravely, and bore petulance and irritability with wonderful patience.

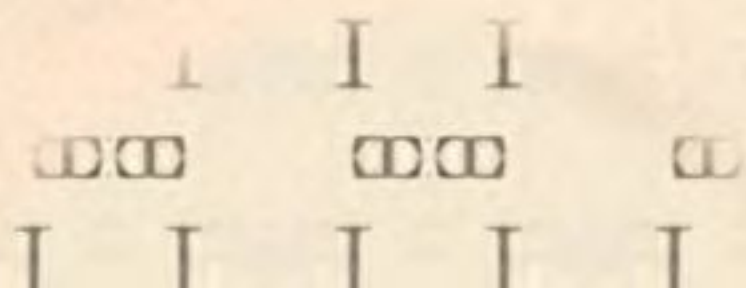
Sir John kept very much to his own room; he had aged greatly since the shock of that night; and his visits to Paul were a mutual source of irritation.

The relation who had come by invitation to spend the winter, began to think her own little home, with her slender means, preferable to the desolation of Combe Place, and she walked about in the village for the amusement which she could not find indoors, and gathered gossip from the Daniels and Pussie Johnstone, which she could repeat to Rose when they sat down to their solitary meals in the dining-room.

"The people at Laurel Cottage are leaving in a day or two, I hear," Miss Pearson said one day.

"I have been expecting to hear they were going soon. Is Miss Bolingbroke better?"

"Yes; but they are a pair of invalids indeed," said little Miss Pearson with a sigh. There seems nothing but sickness and trouble here nowadays, and the weather is so damp. I got my feet wringing wet in the plantation to-day. The workmen are building the



stone bridge where the wooden one was broken down, and there is such a mass of mud and mortar in the path."

"You should go round by the upper gate, Cousin Sophy," Rose said.

"That is such a long way round to the village. Is it really true, Rose, that Miss Bolingbroke has had this enormous fortune left her?"

"I believe it is true," Rose said.

"How much is it? That child, Pussie Johnstone, talks at random, and says it is sixty thousand a year. Why, Miss Bolingbroke will be a catch. She might do for Paul, for I hear she is of an old family."

Poor Rose tried to change the subject, and endeavoured to set Miss Pearson off on one of her especial hobbies—the damp climate of Westover and the way Mrs. Johnstone spoiled Pussy.

"I suppose the Masons were here last summer as usual?" she said, when the Westover gossip was exhausted.

"Yes, Lady Mason always comes with Bee and Bel."

"And the sons, do they come?"

"Yes," said Rose again, with an uncomfortable blush rising to her cheek as she thought of Walter's declaration.

"Well, it must be much pleasanter here in summer than in winter. Sir John always invites me in the winter; however, I am sure I like to be of use, and I am a companion for you, dear."

Miss Pearson was one of those unoccupied single women, of a very uncertain age, who never can realize the flight of time. Her fifth decade was nearly over,

but she affected the air and bearing of thirty, and it never seemed to occur to her that Rose was young enough to be her daughter, I had almost written her granddaughter. The number of those unoccupied spinsters of small means, once so numerous, is rapidly decreasing. And the nobleness of work and useful employment, whether by brain or fingers, is becoming recognized by many who a few years ago were almost ashamed to confess that they followed any handicraft for their own living.

Miss Sophia Pearson was of a former era, and preferred a small lodging and scanty comforts, as a gentlewoman of private means, to any exertion to raise herself into a better position by any useful profession, whereby she might help herself and others.

Rose, who had relapsed into silence, said presently:

"When did you say Miss Bolingbroke was leaving Westover?"

"To-morrow, I think, or the next day; but Mrs. Dove will know. I think I shall take a cup of tea with her this afternoon, if it clears a little."

Rose had written to Stephanie soon after the accident, but had received no answer. Paul too had, as soon as he was able to hold a pen, written to her, but it had brought no reply. Dr. Dove brought but scanty information about the Bolingbrokes, and evidently was reticent by intention.

The very mention of Stephanie's name enraged poor Sir John. He looked upon her as the cause of much trouble and anxiety; for although Paul's life was spared, he had by no means recovered from the effects of the fall into the water. The best advice was taken

for him, and great care was recommended, and a journey to sunnier and warmer climates as soon as he was able to bear it.

But Paul was obstinately determined not to entertain the idea of going to Italy, and seemed to prefer crouching over the fire scribbling verses and sonnets, or sitting in a painful and moody silence, while Rose did her utmost to amuse him.

On this particular day, when everything within and without was particularly gloomy, Paul said suddenly to Rose:

"Have you heard anything about the Bolingbrokes, Rose?"

"Yes. They are going away to-morrow or the next day."

"Then I must see her; I must try to see her. I cannot let her go without a word. Rose, help me to see her. Why will she not write to me? Why will she make no sign? Rose, what shall I do?"

There was a certain selfishness about Paul which showed forth now more than ever it had done. He was angry that Rose was not more sympathetic, and he was determined to gain his point, and at all costs to see Stephanie once more.

"Will you go and see her, Rose, this afternoon, and beg her to come?"

"I am certain Stephanie will not come, Paul; it would be useless to ask her to do so. She wishes to be left to do as she thinks is right, and it would be unkind to vex her by worrying her to come here."

"Worrying! I declare I will run all risk, and drive to Laurel Cottage myself, if you won't help me."

"I cannot help you to do what is so wrong, Paul. You have been shut up in these two rooms for three weeks. You still cough very much, and complain of pain in your side. It would be madness for you to go out, in this weather too!"

"Then you must go and tell her to answer my letter, or to come here. Does my father know all her history? that her family is as good or better than ours? that she is the possessor of great wealth? Ah, that is the worst part of it! I wish that wretched man had died before he made that will! The very thought of him makes me furious!"

"Paul," Rose said quietly—she had gained so much dignity of late—"Paul, it is very wrong to speak in that way of the dead. I am sure Stephanie would say so."

"Well," Paul said, starting up, "will you go, or will you not go, to Laurel Cottage?"

It went to Rose's loyal and loving heart to see how Paul clutched the back of the chair to support himself. How thin he was, how wan and ill he looked, and how he sank down into the chair again exhausted!

"Look here, Rose, if you will go to her and tell her that I am unchanged, that I can never change, then I will wait, wait patiently, if she will give me hope—that I know my father will come round in time—that I don't, oh, I *don't* want that miserable man's money! She can do what she likes with it—build churches and hospitals. I only want *her*. I would not touch a penny of his wealth. Now, *will* you go?"

A brother might send a sister on an errand like this, and to do Paul justice, he did not then know

Rose's love for him, which had grown so rapidly since she had seen that Stephanie was all the world to him, and she was nothing more to him than a sister might be to a brother. He had been in the past too well content to be ministered to by Rose, and on the strength of a remote cousinship to be on the perfectly easy terms of a near relationship, to ask himself whether she might not care for him, as he did not care for her.

Men are blind very often when women see; and especially blind are those men who have had every possible reason given them to think highly of themselves, and are content to receive a certain amount of admiration as their right.

Paul Grenville was one of these, and he had thought too much of himself and his share in the trouble which had fallen on Stephanie, to have many thoughts to spare for Rose.

"Well," he repeated, "will you go?"

Rose hesitated for a few minutes, and then said, in a cold, restrained voice:

"You had better write what you have to say, and I will wait for her answer. I don't think I should succeed in saying all you wish."

"Very well. Give me my writing-case, and go and get ready, there's a dear little Rose. You are so awfully good to me. What should I do without you?"

Rose laughed. There was a ring of bitterness in the sound of her voice, so unlike her merry, light-hearted self, as she said:

"I am glad you appreciate my services. Perhaps

——” She paused, and then added in a low tone, “Perhaps I am an idiot to give them.”

But what she said was lost on Paul; he was now too much engrossed with his letter; and before Rose had left the room he had crumpled up several “beginnings,” and thrown them into the fire.

In half-an-hour Rose re-appeared, protected from the chill damp of the weather by a long fur-lined jacket, buttoned round her throat. She wore a close-fitting velvet hat, where a little crimson bird nestled, giving a touch of colour to her appearance, for her cheeks were very pale, and even her lips, which were firmly closed, seemed to have forgotten their rosy hue.

To any acute observer, or even to any mere casual observer, there were traces on that round, almost child-like face, of a conflict which was not even yet over. But Paul was not an observer of either kind.

“Please light the taper,” he said. “I must seal this.”

“Are you afraid I should read it?” and the moment the words escaped her she repented.

Paul quietly held the wax to the candle she had lighted, and carefully made the seal, pressing on it his signet ring, which bore his crest and cypher.

“There,” he said, falling back exhausted; “thanks for taking it, and do get some answer.”

Rose avoided the path leading through the plantation, and took the upper road. She walked quickly, like one who had an errand which she was determined to get through as soon as possible.

As she went many thoughts passed through her

mind. She had not been about in the world as many girls had been; her life had passed in the retirement of Combe Place, enlivened during the summer months by the annual visit of Lady Mason and her daughters. The second Lady Grenville had been a hopeless and querulous invalid, and Rose had been very much tied to her in her lifetime.

A governess shared with Mr. Daniels' daughter, and one year at a school at Exeter, had been the extent of her education. But she had read a good deal aloud to Paul, and had dipped into many books for herself, so, though far from the standard of the higher education of the times, she was by no means uneducated.

There was a fresh, unconventional charm about her which Stephanie had felt, and a sweetness of disposition which was not the mere good temper resulting from an unimpressible disposition, but the influence of a heart "at leisure with itself," and full of kindness for those about her, which made her too necessary to Paul, and likely to foster his weak powers and self-absorbed character.

It was by no means an easy task which she had undertaken now for his sake, and as she came in sight of Laurel Cottage her heart beat tumultuously. A cart stood at the gate piled with boxes, and there were signs of removal. The whole aspect of everything was depressing. The naked tendrils, with drops of moisture from every spray, hung disconsolately over the porch, and Sampson was bringing out a large basket, which a man by the cart received, saying:

"Is that all? I hope so. My donkey's back will be broke."

"Yes, that's all, and worse luck," said poor Sampson, who had a jaded, injured appearance.

"Worse luck! the gentry are off early to-morrow."

Then the report was true, and Rose was not too soon on her errand.

As the cart rumbled, or rather jogged off down the road, Rose said:

"I am coming in to see Mrs. and Miss Ling." Then, correcting herself, she said:

"Mrs. and Miss Bolingbroke, I mean."

"Aye, there's a change of name, so they say, and a change of fortune too. All I can say is, I wish there had been neither, and that we had kept our lodgers as long as I live, let alone my wife. They give no trouble, not they. They are gentry, poor or rich, and that anyone can see with half an eye."

And now Mrs. Sampson came flying out.

"What do you mean, Sampson, keeping the young lady from the Court standing in the cold and damp? Please to walk in, miss. You'll find Miss Ling in the sitting-room. The poor old lady is quite worn out, and is lying down. They have packed up everything to be sent to the station, and Miss Ling has ordered a fly to be sent from the Junction. She is so afraid of her mamma being jolted. But to tell you the truth, Miss Temple, if I was asked, I should say Miss Ling is the more to be cared for of the two. She is so weak, and eats next to nothing; and she has not been out, except on Sunday, ever since the poor gentleman died. I don't

understand the rights of the case, and I don't like to pry. As I tell Sampson, we have no right to pry into other folks' concerns. But this I know, my heart aches for Miss Ling. I believe I ought to call her by another name, but somehow I can't. She told me herself about it, and said Ling was just the middle of her right name, and that she had called herself by it for what she thought was a good reason."

Mrs. Sampson's long harangue, delivered in an under tone just within the yard, gave Rose time to rally her forces before she went into the sitting-room.

When Mrs. Sampson opened the door, all Rose's intentions as to what she should do or say vanished. In a moment she had sprung towards Stephanie, who partly raised herself in the large arm-chair by the fire, and threw herself into her outstretched arms, sobbing out:

"Oh, I am so glad to see you again! You are not angry that I came?"

"Angry, my darling! How could I be angry with you? You have always been sweet and good to me. Dear Rose," she said, "let us have a last talk together. Mother and I are going away to-morrow."

"But not for ever. You will come back one day."

"No," Stephanie said, "no. The very memory of this place will be pain to me while life lasts. I have gone through here what makes all the former struggles and conflicts seem very small in comparison; and I have had many troubles, Rose, and I am still only twenty-four. I feel as if I was old, quite old; the last month counts for years. But we will not talk of that

dreadful night. I kissed you, dear, when you were asleep; and I looked on him, Paul, for the last time."

"He wants to see you," Rose said, raising herself, and slipping down at Stephanie's feet, and looking up into her face. "I have brought you this letter, and—and I am to take the answer back. He wants to see you. Will you come?"

"No;" Stephanie said. "I bid him my last farewell that night; I shall never see him again."

Then she broke the seal of the envelope, and let it drop on the floor, pausing before she unfolded the letter it contained. There was a long, long silence. Rose watched Stephanie read and re-read the letter. Several tears fell on it, and were quietly wiped away. Presently she said:

"Shall I write my answer, or will you take it for me?"

"Write it, please; he will like it; but——"

"I have packed all my writing materials, except that little case in my travelling-bag; open it, dear, and you will find it."

Rose did as she was told, and then resumed her position at Stephanie's feet. But Stephanie did not begin to write; she sat with the case on her knee, her head thrown back, and her face, even in the dim light of the winter afternoon, had an ethereal beauty upon it, which Rose thought she had never seen there before.

"I should like to tell you what are my plans, dear," she said presently. "I cannot write them now to him, you can tell him if he wants to know."

"He *will* want to know," Rose said; "that is why he sent me here."

"I have business in London to get through first, and then I am going to leave this country, summon my poor brother, and go with my poor mother, and—and Mrs. Hardman, to begin life again. The wealth which is left to me must be used for God, and for the promoting of the welfare of others. I have a vision of founding a hospital and schools, and building a church in some of our colonies needing help. I also wish to build and endow a church where my dear friends the Middletons may carry on their work for God, in some place in the South of England which may be pointed out—*will* be pointed out, no doubt, if I pray for direction. Mrs. Hardman will be my special care, and with my own dear mother and Aubrey I shall have enough on my hands, if God gives me strength. I hope to make good use of money, which in itself has no value in my eyes, and only reminds me of that awful time here, when the man who had accumulated this huge fortune lay dying. Oh, Rose, my darling Rose, I shall never lose the memory of that day; it must make me a sad woman to the end of my life!"

"Don't quite give me up, Stephanie," Rose said. "Please write to me; *don't* give me up."

"No, dear child, when all things are settled I will write; and you must write to me when this cloud has passed from your young life, and you are happy."

"I don't expect to be very happy again," Rose said, hiding her face, which was burning with blushes. "It

can *never* be again as it has been; but I shall try to be good, and thinking of you will help me."

"Stephanie," she said, still with her face hidden, "tell me, *do* tell me, *do* you, could you love Paul?"

There was another long silence, and no answer came.

Then the rapid pen passed over the sheet of paper as the case rested on her knee, and Stephanie fastened the envelope, containing but a few words.

"All that you ask from me I cannot give. All that you wish me to do cannot be done.

"I am leaving Westover to-morrow for ever, and many months will pass before you hear of me again.

"But do not think I shall forget you. I shall remember you in my prayers. I hope, when all this is passed like a dream, you will be happy and useful. I hope that you will brace your soul for the battle of life, and quit you like a man, and be strong.

"As for me, Rose, your sweet and true friend—the true and loyal friend to us both—will tell you what more you want to know.

"Please, as you say you love me, consider these words my last words to you; and that this is my answer to your question, and that *it is final*.

"STEPHANIE."

The parting was over. Rose was gone, and the stillness within the little parlour was profound. Now and then it was broken from without by the tap of a bare branch of clematis against the casement, and the call of a rook returning from a quest for food to the

trees beyond Combe Place. In the silence and stillness the last sore struggle for victory was going on in that brave woman's heart.

No human eye saw it, no earthly voice was near to encourage and cheer; but the angels were with her in that hour, and, soft as "the breath of even," there came at last, borne in upon her soul, the words of hope—words which have been as a trumpet call to many a tired warrior in the battle-field of this toilsome and troublesome world—

"Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life."

BOOK III.

“But, praise be Thine,
I see the whole design;
I, who saw power, see now love perfect too.
Perfect I call Thy plan;
Thanks that I was a man.
Maker, remake, complete;
Think what Thou shalt do.”

ROBERT BROWNING.

“I see some sparks of better hope,
Which elder years may happily bring forth.”

SHAKESPEARE.

BOOK 111

THE HISTORY OF THE
CITY OF BOSTON
FROM THE FIRST SETTLEMENT
TO THE PRESENT TIME
IN TWO VOLUMES
BY NATHANIEL BENTLEY
VOLUME THE SECOND

1780

CHAPTER XIV.

BY THE SHORE OF A LAKE.

IN the slopes which bordered a lake in a country of the far West, beyond the waters of the great dividing Atlantic, a long, low house, surrounded with a verandah, was lying in the last rays of the sun just sinking behind a range of mountains on the farther side.

There was a terrace before the house, and a tall lady stepped out on it, and watched a boat which was crossing from the opposite shore.

The lady leaned upon the low parapet, and answered the wave of handkerchiefs from the boat with her large fan, which in the heat of summer in these regions is a very necessary appendage.

The lady's hair was grey, but her cheeks had the flush of health, and her eyes were luminous with that mysterious radiance which comes from within. In Stephanie's case it might be called "the clear shining after the rain;" for peace and even happiness had come to her at last, after the long years of pain and trouble through which the hand of Love had brought her safely.

As the boat neared the shore there was a chorus of young voices.

"We have had such a splendid day."

"Yes; no one has had any misfortune except——"

"I have lost my hat, Madre. You won't be angry, will you?"

The speaker was a boy of seven years old, who was the first to leap from the boat, a boy whose clustering fair curls and tall graceful figure might well attract attention wherever he went.

"We've not forgotten father. We have brought him a great basket of strawberries and cherries, such beauties! And I've brought you a white flower, Madre, such a lovely one!"

This speaker was a girl who was helped out of the boat by an active young woman, with a dark skin and raven hair, who had a bright-coloured handkerchief tied turban-fashion on her head, and a still brighter one crossed on her chest.

"Chloe said you'd be angry about Stephen's hat, but I knew you wouldn't. You don't get angry about misfortunes, do you, Madre?"

"That depends, my Lily, whether the misfortune is carelessness or not. But look, you are in Grannie's way."

And Stephanie, who had come down to the water's edge, took the hand of an old lady, and drawing it through her arm, led her gently up the slopes to the terrace.

The wrinkled, furrowed face was turned up to Stephanie with a loving glance.

"Thank you, my dear," Mrs. Hardman said. "We've had such a nice time. The children have been very good."

"I am so glad, dear," Stephanie replied. "The boat is a great help to get air and refreshment in these hot days. You are not too tired, I hope."

"No, darling; no. How is the invalid?"

"He has been tolerably comfortable to-day, and he is on the verandah on the other side of the house, and mother is with him."

They walked slowly round to the verandah, and found the two children displaying their treasures to their father and grandmother.

Ten years have passed since we last saw Stephanie Bolingbroke, and have brought with them many changes. Her dreams of usefulness have been realized, and to few has been given the power as it was given to her to realize them.

Her mother was seated by the side of her only son, who had returned to them with his two children about six years after Stephanie had settled in the new country. Aubrey had married a girl whom he had met on that first voyage, when he was leaving England under the cloud which had so overshadowed him and his family, and caused the trouble and sorrow of which Stephanie had had to endure the greatest part.

There had always been a fascination about Aubrey, in spite of his weakness and his faults. Almost the first letter which reached him through Mr. Swifte told of Maude Lyfton's marriage to a Scotchman who had

given her the brilliant ornaments, and poor Aubrey had indeed felt that he had not only loved in vain, but sinned in vain! Thus the gentle, simple-hearted girl, who had returned to her home in Melbourne after two years' schooling in England, had pitied him when he told her he was an exile, and that he had been ill-treated by someone for whom he had sacrificed himself, and but for whom he might have been a prosperous merchant in England!

It was like Aubrey, to bewail his condition, and still more like him to throw the blame upon another instead of taking it upon himself. The gentle and confiding girl asked no questions, and when Aubrey told her he loved her, and he would work in the office to which Mr. Swifte had given him an introduction, she cast in her lot with his, and they were married a year after Aubrey had gone out to Australia. It was a short-lived happiness for her, and perhaps it was as well that she never knew the real truth of her husband's story. Aubrey found himself left with two children at her death, a boy and a girl; and then it was that he wrote to Stephanie and asked her if she would receive the children in her new home, and that he would bring them himself; then he would return and work harder than ever to retrieve his character in Australia.

Stephanie's answer was what might be expected, and her mother looked forward with a tremulous joy to the return of her prodigal, and was prepared to love his children for his sake. On the voyage to America Aubrey had a fall from the ship's side as he was getting into a boat lowered to go ashore on an island they

passed, and so injured his back that the ship's surgeon was for some days doubtful if he would live to reach his destination. But he lived, and Stephanie received him a helpless invalid for life, and adopted the children as her own.

She would not let them call her "mother," for they had a dim memory of their own mother, and the name was in Stephanie's eyes sacred, but she substituted "Madre mia," which was often shortened to "mia" only, and was as music in the children's ears. The sweet joyousness of childhood was what Stephanie needed, and Aubrey's children were the sunshine of her life.

Stephen had the most chivalrous devotion for her, and his sister would sometimes say that she loved the "Grannies" and her father all alike, but that Stephen had his very best love, and that was the Madre.

Aubrey had everything done for him to soften the weariness of an invalid life, and perhaps Mrs. Bolingbroke had never been more thoroughly content than now. She had no trouble; she had everything at her command, and Aubrey always with her. Perhaps sometimes Mrs. Bolingbroke would feel a little jealous about the other "Grannie," whom Stephanie always put first. She was always placed opposite Stephanie at table, and the large household were taught by example to treat her with deep respect.

Now, as she came leaning on Stephanie's arm to the couch on the verandah where Aubrey lay, she said:

"I wish you had been with us, Mrs. Bolingbroke. It was so cool and pleasant on the water."

"I don't like the water," was the reply. "See, Stephen, you are shaking father's couch. Be gentle, my dear boy."

"He is all right," Aubrey said. "I like to have him, mother."

Stephen was feeding his father with the wild fruit which grew in abundance in the woods which skirted the banks of the lake on the opposite side, and was a little disappointed that his Grannie refused to share the feast.

Little Lily had curled herself up on Stephanie's lap when she seated herself on one of the low chairs; and when Chloe arrived to say she must come to bed at once, she said:

"Let me stay, Mia, please."

"Ten minutes. Yes, Chloe," Stephanie said, "please," but before the ten minutes were over Lily had fallen asleep in Stephanie's arms, and she carried her to the house, calling Stephen to follow.

The letters were now brought to the verandah by a servant, and the English papers filled the bag to overflowing. Stephanie on her return looked at them, putting many aside as business, and handing the papers to Aubrey.

Presently he said, "Look at the announcement in the *Times*, Stephanie." And Stephanie read:

"On the 1st instant, Sir Paul Grenville, Bart., of Combe Place, North Devon, to Rose, only daughter of the late Colonel Temple, of the Irish Rifles."

"I am so glad," Stephanie said, "it has come at last, as I always hoped it would come." Then she said:

"I think it is time to be going into the house; the chill is coming up from the water. I shall be off early to-morrow," she said, "before the heat of the day comes on, for I have a great deal to get through in Greystone."

"Don't go and over-fatigue yourself, dearest," her mother said, but Stephanie did not answer. Her beautiful eyes had the old, far-away look in them, as she stood for a moment looking out across the lake to the mountains beyond, before she went into the house.

Mrs. Hardman rose and followed her, and when Stephanie saw her she paused and put her arm tenderly round the old lady.

"What was it, dear, your brother showed you in the paper? You said you were glad, so I hope it did not vex you."

"No, darling, no; it was only what I have been wishing for. Sir Paul Grenville has married dear Rose Temple, that is all."

Mrs. Hardman sighed gently.

"I always hoped—I always thought—perhaps, when Sir John died, you might——"

Stephanie bent down and kissed the dear old face, which was turned to hers.

"Dear, I shall never marry," she said; "why should I? I have all I can want, and God is so good to me."

And yet that night, when the stars were shining in the deep blue of the sky above, and the lake made its murmur as it kissed the pebbly shore, Stephanie said,

"If mine is a lonely heart, as far as earth is concerned, let it bring me nearer, O God, to Thee, who 'settest the solitary in families,' and has given me the orphans for my children and those who are in need for my inheritance."

CHAPTER XV.

CROWN POINT.

THE city of Greystone was beautifully situated, with a range of mountains shutting it in on the north, and a valley through which a river flowed opening southward.

Greystone was evidently a prosperous place, and quantities of corn were grown for exportation in that rich and well-watered valley, and fresh settlers were constantly arriving to take up the land in the neighbourhood, and build their own houses, and employ many who came out from the mother-country year after year—some to find labour, and remunerative labour, too; others to fail, through want of energy, or perseverance, or, oftener still, from falling into evil hands on first getting to a strange land.

Greystone had its market square, its stores, its town hall, and its large hotel—all built of the white stone which was worked from quarries in the nearest range of hills, and provided the substantial help to the settlers of good material for their houses.

No doubt Greystone looked too white and new for Old England taste, but time will chasten its appearance, as it chastens everything, and in another fifty years Greystone will be one of the older cities of the far

West, and, as age counts in the New World, venerable in its aspect.

There were generally arrivals at the hotel in the season, for the climate in this lake district of the West is very delightful; and though Greystone lies out of the beaten track, people do resort to the banks of the river, and make expeditions to the mountains, where the air is crisp and exhilarating, and the short summer is full of beauty.

The season was getting late when one morning two travellers, who had arrived at the hotel the evening before, set out to explore the town, and to inquire about the places of interest in the neighbourhood.

"The town is much larger than I expected to find it," Sir Paul Grenville said, to that useful personage who is to be found ready to give information in the bureau of hotels at home and abroad.

"I want to see a lady who lives in these parts—a Miss Bolingbroke. Can you direct me to her house?"

"Aye, I just think I can," was the reply. "Why, she's the great lady hereabouts. You ask to be directed to her house. I guess she has more than one house, so which house do you want to find?"

"I think," Rose said, "Miss Bolingbroke has a home for those who come out here to seek for employment."

"Yes, you bet she has, and a church, and a parsonage, and a school; and then there's what is called 'Stephanie's Avenue.' Now, if you cross the square, and turn to the right, you will see the church before you. There's a few walnut trees on the road; the lady planted them, and made the garden before the house."

"What house? Do you mean she lives there?"

"Sometimes, sometimes, not always; her own place is five miles down at the river's mouth, just where the lake opens out. A fine place it is; you should go there. Shall I order a car for you, or will you go by boat? The lady keeps a little steam launch of her own, but there are several which ply backwards and forwards. I suppose you know she is a lady of fortune? Why, I guess her income is over five thousand a week—pretty fair that, eh? And I'll tell you what," the official of the hotel said, getting confidential: "You may search the world over, and you'll not come across a woman who has done what she has done in these parts since she set foot here, now ten years ago. I don't hold with her religion; I'm a Baptist, and we've a wonderful good minister here. I say, I don't go to the church, and I don't like anything like forms and ceremonies; but, for all that, I respect Miss Bolingbroke, and her parson too. He is a right good one, and he don't have any rough feelings towards the chapels. We are well off for chapels. There's the Methodists, and the Independents, and the Brethren, have all a little place of their own as well as ourselves; and there's room for us all."

Paul had moved away. The conversation about the various sects in Greystone was not at all interesting to him. Rose followed him, and put her hand into his arm. Her first youth had long passed, but she still retained her beauty, and looked much younger than her years.

"Is it not nice to hear all this of her?" Rose said. "It does make one feel proud to have her for a friend."

Paul did not reply, and they pursued their way across the market square towards the church, the spire

of which came in sight as they turned out into the road. The church was of good proportions, and the schoolhouse and parsonage were very pretty buildings. A little too white, like all the rest, but the parsonage was covered with the quick-growing climbing plants of the country.

There were three large square houses a little beyond, shadowed by the walnut trees of which the man at the hotel had spoken. And the sumachs and maples were taking a tinge of red on their leaves, which would soon be a perfect blaze of flame colour as the summer waned to its close.

"Look, Paul," Rose said, "look what is over the centre house of the three. Shining in gold letters, too."

"STEPHANIE'S HOME FOR EMIGRANTS."

And, in much smaller type below—

"ALL ARE WELCOME HERE, FOR HIS SAKE, WHO SAID, 'I WAS
A STRANGER, AND YE TOOK ME IN.' "

As Paul and Rose were standing before this block of buildings, a voice near them said:

"This is a noble work carried on by an English lady, who devotes a large fortune to it. Can I show you over the church and schools?"

"Thanks; you are very good," Paul said. "Are we likely to find Miss Bolingbroke at home?"

"She is at present making her head-quarters on the banks of the Grey Lake, which gives this prosperous town of ours its name. But she is very frequently here,

for she gives personal care and superintendence to this Home. Many servants and governesses are sent out from here to the neighbouring towns and districts. Miss Bolingbroke will not be here to-day, I think, but we can inquire at the Home."

All the time the clergyman had been speaking, Rose felt he was looking earnestly at her and Paul, and she was sure she had seen him, for his voice was familiar.

"I ought to introduce myself," Mr. Middleton said, "for I am an old friend of Miss Bolingbroke."

"And we are old friends, too," Rose exclaimed. "We have not seen her for many years, and we have come here on purpose to pay her a visit."

"If you knew Miss Bolingbroke in past years, you may have heard her mention us as her friends."

"Mr. and Mrs. Middleton," said Rose quickly. "Oh, yes, you were her best friends! I heard you had come out to America."

"It was at her express desire; and my wife, who had been a great invalid, would not allow me to refuse the offer on her account. God has wonderfully overruled everything for us for good. This climate here has suited her health, and she is now fairly strong and able to take her part in my work. Will you come into the parsonage and see her? She will be glad to welcome any friends of Miss Bolingbroke."

"You know, perhaps, that she lives with her mother and Mrs. Hardman? Her brother, who injured his spine by a fall on shipboard, also lives with her, and his two nice children. They are a very happy house-

hold, and Miss Bolingbroke is the centre of all good works here.

"Everyone is fond of her, and, as you have heard I daresay, her literary productions have lately won her a great reputation both in this country and in England."

They found Mrs. Middleton with a little girl, her only child, to whom she was giving a lesson on the piano. The pretty room opening on the flower-scented verandah looked like home; and while Paul and Mr. Middleton went to the church and "The Home," Lady Grenville sat with Mrs. Middleton to rest, for the heat of the sun was overpowering, reflected from the white buildings and white roads.

Little Irene ran away at her mother's bidding, and Mrs. Middleton said:

"She is our only treasure. We have called her Irene, for she brought us peace and happiness. My health improved so wonderfully after her birth, and I am now fairly strong, and so happy."

Indeed, it did not need words to assure anyone of Mrs. Middleton's happiness; her face told its own story.

"Tell me about Stephanie," Rose said.

"There is so much to tell," Mrs. Middleton replied. "She is the pervading influence in this place. And not only here. Hundreds who have come out from England friendless and forlorn have been received by her, and cared for and helped to earn their living. Servants tempted by the hope of high wages, governesses, and young men who think they can learn farming, or farm themselves, and fall into bad habits from the want of

a helping hand, all these, now in different parts of the world, could tell you what she has done for them. One of those houses you saw is a school, and she engages excellent mistresses to teach, and invites those who can well afford to pay to send their children there. Then she gives personal supervision, and lectures herself once a week to the assembled girls. She has had her disappointments and her troubles, but when all is told I think she is reaping a rich reward for all the past. It may be said of her, that she 'has sown in tears and reaped in joy,' and I am sure she 'bears her sheaves with her.' "

"And is her mother happy?"

"Yes; I fancy there are little rubs sometimes between Mrs. Hardman and her, but Stephanie's tact is so wonderful, and she smoothes rough places. She will never marry now. I need not tell you she has had many suitors, and that her fortune has tempted unworthy ones, but there has always been an answer, 'I never intend to marry.' "

Rose turned her face away to conceal the tears which in spite of herself rose to her eyes. She knew well enough that that answer, given again and again, had at last convinced Paul that nothing would change her determination. Rose had been throughout the confidante of all her husband's concerns; from early girlhood she had been as a sister to him, and thus it was easier for her to accept the position he offered her as his wife, than it would have been had there been any break in their confidence and friendship. "I feel like his second wife," she thought, "as second wives must feel when they know—as they often do know—that the

first love of their husband's life is never forgotten, and remains in the old place in his heart, though the new one is dear. I know I am dear to Paul; he could not do without me, and there is no change in my feelings, for I have loved him all my life, and only him."

"Is Stephanie as beautiful as she used to be? Has she changed?" Rose asked, after a pause.

"There is her last photograph," Mrs. Middleton said, taking a large cabinet photograph from the mantelshelf.

The tall stately figure in a plain black dress could be no other than Stephanie. But the wealth of rich golden-brown hair was grey, and swept back in a mass from the straight, level brow, from which the beautiful hazel eyes looked out with the same restful, far-seeing gaze as of old. The lines round the mouth were deepened, but on her lips was still written the law of kindness. Rose gazed at the photograph without speaking, till at last she said:

"She is changed, but she is more beautiful than ever."

"Yes, I knew you would think so," was the reply.

Sir Paul and Mr. Middleton now returned, and at Mrs. Middleton's earnest request they stayed to the mid-day meal, which was served in a cool, shady room at the back of the house. And then in the afternoon Sir Paul and Rose set off together to Crown Point, which was the name of Stephanie's spacious and beautiful house.

They preferred a car to the river, and a drive some few miles by the road, through valleys skirted by purple mountains, which brought them to Crown Point.

A few farms and cottages were sprinkled about, and a little church of modest proportions. The little fabric of the larger one at Greystone was just outside the white gate leading to the house.

The coachman pointed out every object of interest, and seemed to take the same pride in the lands of Crown Point as the official at the hotel had done.

On arriving at the house, Sir Paul and Rose were conducted by a servant through a long corridor, spread with white matting and coloured rugs, to a long, low room, which opened by several French windows on the verandah. The lake was seen like a series of pictures framed by the posts of the verandah, where the scarlet blossoms of the taxonia hung in graceful festoons, mixed with the large clusters of the stephanotis, which filled the air with fragrance.

"It is like fairyland," Rose exclaimed. "How lovely!"

And presently, through one of the openings, her tall figure, clothed in black, brought out in distinct outline against the blue expanse behind her, came Stephanie.

She advanced towards her visitors with a stately grace peculiar to herself, and with a bright smile greeted them with, "Are you strangers here? and can I——?"

Then a bright crimson came to her cheeks as she recognized her friends.

For a moment there was a pause, and then Rose, with all her wonted simplicity and sweetness, went up to Stephanie, and taking her hands, kissed her, saying:

"I am so glad we have found you once more."

"Yes," Paul said. "We are rewarded for our long journey, and it is delightful to find you well in such beautiful surroundings."

"Ah! you see us at our best," Stephanie said; "but we have a lovely view from here when the hills are snow-capped and the narrow part of our lake frozen." She had quite recovered her self-possession now, and, thanks to Rose, all constraint was gone.

"Now tell me how long you will stay? I have plenty of guest-chambers, and next weeks I shall have some friends from Boston, who are on a journey—friends whom you will like to meet," she said, crossing to Paul.

"We are staying at the hotel in the town," Paul said.

"Oh, I cannot let my friends—especially those who have taken a long journey to see me—stay at an hotel! You must let me send at once for your luggage, and have it brought here. We have constant communication by the river. Did you drive here?"

"Yes; and I think we must return to Greystone till to-morrow, when, if you really wish for us, we will gladly come here for a few days."

Rose spoke with a questioning look at her husband. He hesitated for a moment, and said:

"I do not think we can refuse such a kind offer."

Then Stephanie led them to the verandah, and introduced them to Aubrey, who was lying as usual on a couch in his particular corner. Mrs. Hardman was also there knitting, but she did not come forward to the visitors till Stephanie said:

"Come and welcome some old friends from England, dear—Sir Paul and Lady Grenville."

Mrs. Hardman made one of her old-fashioned curtseys, and then said:

"Which rooms shall we get ready, Stephanie? for I will go and see about them."

"The best we have," Stephanie said with a bright smile; "the best rooms for the best friends, of course. But there is no haste, dear, for Lady Grenville wishes to return to Greystone this evening for the luggage. Will you order coffee and strawberries to be brought here, and tell mother and the children to come to us?"

Mrs. Hardman seemed glad to get away, and trotted off on her errand.

From that moment the dead past was left to bury its dead, and no reference was made to it.

Mrs. Bolingbroke and the two children soon appeared, and Rose won Lily's heart by admiring some eggs which had been found in a wild duck's nest amongst the rushes by the lake, while Stephen talked to Paul in the free and pleasant manner which marks a boy who is well brought up.

Poor Aubrey was the most ill at ease of the party, and when Sir Paul and Rose were gone his sad face made his sister go up to him and say:

"Are you suffering more to-day, dear Aubrey?"

"Not in body," he said, "but in mind. Oh, Stephanie, my wasted life! my wasted life! And to be lying here useless at my age, with such memories as crowd on me! Do you suppose I do not feel my position when people come here like those who have just left us? They know what I have been, and it is very humiliating!"

"If they know any particulars, which I rather doubt, dear Aubrey, they would be tender in their judgment.

But why will you continually lament over the past? It is all forgiven and forgotten. Think of your children, what a joy they are to us all!"

"They are not always a joy to me. What an inheritance I leave them! When that boy talks to me, as if I were the best father in the world, it cuts me to the heart; and then his mother, his sweet, gentle mother—to think that she died believing in me!"

"She had no reason to doubt you, Aubrey. You were always good to her, and you were working well in the place to which Mr. Swifte sent you. Have we not letters to prove this? I think you make a mistake when you give way to morbid regrets. You are now brave and patient in bearing the confinement and pain, be brave in meeting the remembrance of the past. *That* is a lesson we have all to learn, more or less. *I* have had to learn it, Aubrey."

"But you never were to blame. You never were weak and foolish, and betrayed into sin as I was. You were sinned against, and that makes all the difference."

"Yes, it makes some difference; but, Aubrey, scarcely a day passes but I recall that awful time when all this wealth passed into my keeping. I pray to use it for God, I pray to make it a blessing; but it is a very great responsibility, and I sometimes wonder what answer I shall give when the message comes, 'Give account of thy stewardship.'"

Then Stephanie bent over her brother and kissed his forehead.

"You have been a good sister to me, and you are like a mother to my children. May God bless you, Stephanie."

So she went on her way followed by blessing, and her heart, which had an hour before beat painfully when first the two people so intimately associated with her past life had stood before her all unawares, was now hushed to calm again.

Yes! Stephanie bore her sheaves with her, her golden sheaves, and surely her brother was one.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CROWN AT LAST.

THE weeks which Sir Paul and Lady Grenville spent at Crown Point were very bright and full of interest. Stephanie's literary fame gathered round her many bright intellects from far and near. Her house was celebrated for its simple hospitality; and the free, unconventional life at Crown Point was not only admired, but imitated.

A deeper current ran through it, just as the river runs through that pleasant country, and, though silent, is felt to be the cause of the wealth of flowers, and the rich harvests of corn and fruit, for which it is famous; so was the religion which Stephanie was never ashamed to confess, felt to underlie the beauty and delight which all who knew Crown Point acknowledged. There was a singular absence of pretension of any kind about the mistress of this lovely home.

The regular calling together of the household morning and evening in the large hall for reading and prayers was never omitted. On Sunday there was service in the little church, sometimes conducted by Mr. Middleton, though oftener by his helper, or curate, as we should say in England; but the religion was felt rather than talked about.

Sir Paul was lying in his old position in a boat on

the lake one lovely afternoon, with two American gentlemen who were staying at Crown Point with their wives.

As the boat left the little landing-stage, Stephanie's figure was seen standing there.

The rowers stopped, and she waved her hand, and said, "*Bon voyage.*"

"Will you come with us?" Sir Paul said.

"No; I have ladies to entertain while the gentlemen go off to the land of the lotus-eaters. You will find plenty of water-lilies near the opposite shore. Bring us some as your spoil."

Just as she had spoken, Rose came up, and put her hand in Stephanie's.

"So like Paul," she said, laughing, "to lie back there and let the two gentlemen row. He is the same Paul as of old. Do you remember——? Rose stopped.

"Do I remember how I stood on the bank of the little lake at Combe Place, and watched you and Sir Paul, is that what you were going to say?"

"Yes," Rose answered; and then, though by common consent the peaceful past had never been spoken of, Stephanie went on:

"I am so glad to see you happy, my darling, and I think you are so well suited to him."

"Yes, I am very happy. When dear Uncle John was dying, he commended me to Paul's care, and he wished me to marry him. I think he was afraid," she said, laughing, "that Lady Mason would at last carry off the captive, and that Paul would take Bee or Bel, to save further trouble you know."

"Are they still Bee and Bel Mason?"

"Oh, yes, and what with intellect, and what with music and perfection of every kind, Lady Mason has so tired out everyone, that her visits to her friends are not so frequent as they were!"

"And are the sons married?"

"Herbert is married, not Walter; they are both very good sons, and marvellously patient with their mother. Oh, she *is* trying, or rather *was* trying, for I do not think we shall offer the yearly hospitality at Combe Place which was always extended indefinitely; but girls, or rather women, like Bee and Bel are getting so common now-a-days. I am not clever I know, but I do think the reading of every review and magazine, and the smattering of knowledge which is got in that way, helps to make superficial women. It is bad enough when they talk grandly of art, and literature, and science, as if they were students of all in turn; but when, like Bel Mason, they begin to discuss religion, and openly set aside all modesty, and carry the superior scoffing tone into matters of faith, then it is too much. This is Bel Mason's latest craze, and she talks of 'old-fashioned ideas,' and the advance of science, and the childhood of the world accepting what maturer wisdom rejects; and her mother still admires her, and says Bel is a deep thinker, and that shallow ones—meaning *me* of course—cannot follow her."

Stephanie laughed.

"I expect it is the old story of shallow writers, and that Miss Bel Mason and her friends, instead of being deep thinkers, have never really thought at all. I hear plenty of this kind of conversation amongst the people

who come here, and I always find, like the hero of the novel which is making such a sensation on both sides of the Atlantic, that they have simply no arguments, and nothing to say. They have been 'bowled over' without any resistance, and certainly without any earnest desire to be guided right. But if a Guide is not even acknowledged, how can they be guided? It is very sad; but after all there is the living witness—the secret of the Lord, which is with them that fear Him, and how can anything outside affect this if indeed we possess it."

Rose and Stephanie were pacing slowly up and down the terrace, which was raised above the lake; and Sir Paul, lying back in the boat, was watching them.

Presently one of the gentlemen said, "Miss Bolingbroke is a wonderful woman. I had heard a great deal about her, and I never was more surprised in my life than when I came here. I have read her thoughtful, clever papers in the *Decade* for years, and her books as they appear; and I had pictured to myself a strong-minded, rather severe, and melancholy woman, who would look down on inferior mortals—and, instead, I find her what she is, full of brightness, and liking every one to be 'merry and joyful,' instead of melancholy and severe. Besides, how ready she is to look on both sides of any subject, and how quick to acknowledge she is wrong, if indeed it turns out that she is. It is enough to convert any man to her faith to live with her."

"Miss Bolingbroke has a history," the other gentle-

man began. I have heard that this wealth was left her by a man whom she would not marry. Is this so, Sir Paul?"

Paul did not greatly care to discuss Stephanie's history with a stranger; so he only made a sign of assent.

"Yes, I believe it is true," said his companion; "and I have heard that she has rebuffed all those who have dared to propose to her very decidedly. I know for a fact she said to one man that she held her wealth as a trust, and that she should never use it in any other way than to help those who needed help, and promote the religion of Christ. This was a well-merited snub, for I know he was certainly thinking of the money as much as he thought of her, perhaps more."

"Then he was rightly served," was the rejoinder.

The last day of the Grenvilles' visit was a great day at Crown Point, and Stephanie had insisted on their remaining for the festivities which marked the eighth anniversary of the opening of Stephanie's Home, and the consecration of the church in Greystone.

The children, and the whole household were astir early, gathering flowers and putting up flags on the terrace, and preparing the great hall for the expected guests.

About ten o'clock Stephanie's steam-launch, with flags flying, came up across the lake from the river's mouth, and several boats followed, bringing the inmates of Stephanie's Home. Mr. and Mrs. Middleton and Irene were the first to come on the terrace, where

Stephen and Lily and several other children who were staying in the house were waiting to receive them.

Stephanie stood at the head of the little landing-stage to welcome everyone as they came up the steps.

Almost everyone was greeted by name, and a posy of flowers given to each by her own hand from a large basket at her side.

The day was cloudless and the air crisp, for Saint Luke's summer was near at hand. There were games for the children and comfortable seats for those whose playing days were over, and kind words and gentle sympathy in every perplexity from Stephanie. As she moved about her presence was felt everywhere to be like sunshine. Dinner and tea were both served in the spacious hall, and after tea Stephanie stood up at the head of one of the tables and addressed her guests. Her clear voice and distinct utterance made every word tell. Those words were not many, but they were well chosen and appropriate, and came from her heart.

Then at her request the whole party followed her across the grounds to the little church, she leading the way, with Mrs. Hardman leaning on her arm, her own mother following with little Stephen and Lily, one on either side. Mrs. Middleton played the sweet-toned organ, and Stephanie led the young voices in a familiar hymn tune in which everyone could join.

Mr. Middleton read a short lesson and a few prayers, ending with the general thanksgiving and the benediction, and then there was a few minutes' silence before the congregation dispersed.

Soon it was all over, and the last passenger had embarked. The steam-launch was the last this time, and Mr. Middleton, standing at the bow, raised his hat and said, "Three cheers for Stephanie, and thanks for a happy day."

Then there was such a burst of cheers from all the boats, and across the water the joyful voices rang, and the blue mountains echoed the sound, till at last with the receding boats it died away, and silence fell over the lake.

A little later and Stephanie came out on the piazza alone.

The moon was making a silver pathway across the still waters, which seemed to lead away to the blue mysterious distance, where the mountain's dim outline could be just discerned.

Presently Paul and Rose, who had also come out to enjoy the beauty of the evening, came to the place where she stood, and Rose said:

"Our last night; and what a beautiful night it is!"

Then the three friends walked together on the terrace, talking of the day that was just over, and of the happiness which had been so unclouded.

After that they were silent with that silence which is the outcome of real friendship, and of the assurance that, whether silent or speaking, there is perfect sympathy and understanding of each other's mind.

Stephanie's face was full of peace, and the white masses of her hair shone in the moonlight like an aureole round her stately head.

Both Paul and his wife were looking at her as she leaned against the balustrade, lost in thought.

Presently a voice called, "Stephanie!" It was Aubrey's voice; and she turned and went into the house.

"She is more beautiful than ever," Rose said.

"Yes," Paul replied; "yes, it is the soul shining in her face which makes it beautiful,"

Rose clung more closely to his arm as he spoke, looking up at him with wistful, questioning eyes, which he seemed to understand, for he bent down and kissed the sweet upturned face, still so fair and youthful, on which time had scarcely left a trace.

"My darling," he said, "I am well content. I can say of your love, as of Stephanie's noble life, *The End Crowns All!*"

Yes, the end crowned all; the end so far as we see it, for we leave Stephanie at this point of her life's story. None can say that her hopes were unfulfilled, nor her victory not won. With steadfast and unwavering constancy she had held on in the way that was marked out for her. Why thus marked out, why so often full of thorns and briars, it is not for us to inquire. But whatever the conflict had been, peace had come to her while still in the prime of her womanhood. If the nearest and closest love, towards which the heart of every woman does at times yearn, was never to be hers, she had the love of many, and the tenderest affection of those who trod with her the path of daily life.

The refiner of silver knows well what heat of the furnace is needed to bring out the bright surface in

which he can see his image. It is an old story that he would heat the fire again and again till he could see his own face clearly reflected in the silver whence all the dross was purged. And there is no other key to what may appear to us the deep mystery of trials like Stephanie's, which seem to be the outcome of the sin of others, as a direct effect from an acknowledged cause. That the great Refiner had not watched in vain, the life-story of this noble and gifted woman is a sufficient proof.

A few days after the parting from her friends, she received a thick packet addressed in Rose's handwriting, and a few words from her explained it. "I have copied these verses of my husband's for you, darling, and I send them to you because I love them; and I think you will like to know they were written (that is, the rough copy of them was written) on the last night we spent at Crown Point—the last night of our happy visit, which passed like a beautiful dream."

Stephanie was seated on the terrace by Aubrey, and Mrs. Hardman, and her mother, when the letters were brought in, and little Lily was at her feet, and Stephen standing at the back of her chair. As she read the verses, a bright smile broke over her face, and then vanished as tears fell on the manuscript.

"What is it, Stephanie?" her mother asked; and Mrs. Hardman said anxiously, "Nothing to vex you, dear, I hope?"

"Oh, no," she answered, and the tears were hastily wiped away; "oh, no. Tears are sometimes happy tears, and I think mine were then. I will read the

poetry Rose Grenville has sent me aloud, if you all like to hear it, this evening, not now." And gathering up her letters, she moved away.

Lily was about to follow her, but Stephen stopped his sister. "Madre would rather be alone," he said.

In the evening Stephanie read, as she promised, the verses, which may well close this chapter of her life's story.

THE LILIES IN THE GARDEN.

AT CROWN POINT.

MORNING AND EVENING.

"ON a radiant summer morning
I walked through a garden bright,
Where the roses and geraniums
Glowed beneath the new-born light;
Dewy turf like emerald gem
Sparkling in a diadem.

"Through the ranks of gorgeous flowers
I paced slowly, with my eyes
Well-nigh dazzled by the colours,
Every turn a new surprise;
While in spires of purest snow
Tall white lilies stately grow.

"They were fair and very lovely,
But they shone not like the rest—
Ruby roses, purple pansies,
Calceolarias, golden vest;
And beneath the blue lobelias
Might be counted with the best.

“Like a band of rainbow glory,
All the flowers together blend;
Like a beautiful life story,
Harmonized from end to end,
They looked up to greet the sun
From their places one by one.

“For the sun had brought their beauty
Forth in wondrous power that day,
He had painted all the petals
With their varied colours gay;
And they blessed him for his shining,
Smiled in answer to his lay.

“Not the less I loved the lilies,
But their flowers were very pale,
Here and there a drop of amber
Lay within their snowy veil;
Like a blossom on the breast
Laid in dead hands crossed to rest.

“Fair they were, and by their whiteness
Colours shone more vivid yet,
Seen against the crimson roses
These more crimson seemed to get.
Ah, that garden in the sunlight,
All its splendour haunts me yet!

“But the day wore on to evening,
And the great sun sank to rest,
Stars came forth like countless treasures
Hidden in the sky's deep breast;
And the twilight hushed the sleepers
In the cradle and the nest.

“Once again I paced the garden
Where at dawn my feet had trod,

Very dark the turf beneath me,
Gray and sombre looked the sod;
Spangled now no more with dewdrops,
Pure as souls gone up to God.

“All the colours, rich and glorious,
That had met my wondering gaze—
Ruby roses, purple pansies,
Shining in the sun's bright rays—
All had vanished, all had fled,
Blossoms colourless instead.

“Then beyond, like nothing earthly,
Stood the lilies pure and white,
Gleaming out amid the darkness,
Clothed like spirits with the light—
In a strange ethereal beauty
Breathing incense to the night.

“So in nights of pain and trouble
I have seen the pure and fair
Rise to bless us with their beauty,
Stedfast in their love and care,
Wearing round their foreheads white
Aureoles, like the saints in light.

“Lilies these in God's own garden,
Lost in glare of noontide bright,
Scarcely noticed, passed unheeded,
Till the shadows of the night
Close around, then they are seen
Shining pure in spotless sheen.

“Lilies these which stand revealed
When the darkness spreads its pall,
Like good angels sent to help us,
Lest our faltering footsteps fall;

Whispering, when we faint and fail,
'*Love supreme* is over all.'

"Let us bless God for His sunshine,
And the glories it may bring—
Flowers of youth in rich luxuriance,
Like the roses in the spring;
But if darkness o'er us steals,
Learn the lesson it reveals.

"Stately lilies, fair and gracious,
Rising out of shadows dim,
You have brought to me sweet tokens
Of the power that rests with Him,
Who across the darkest night
Sends a ray of heaven's own light."

THE END.

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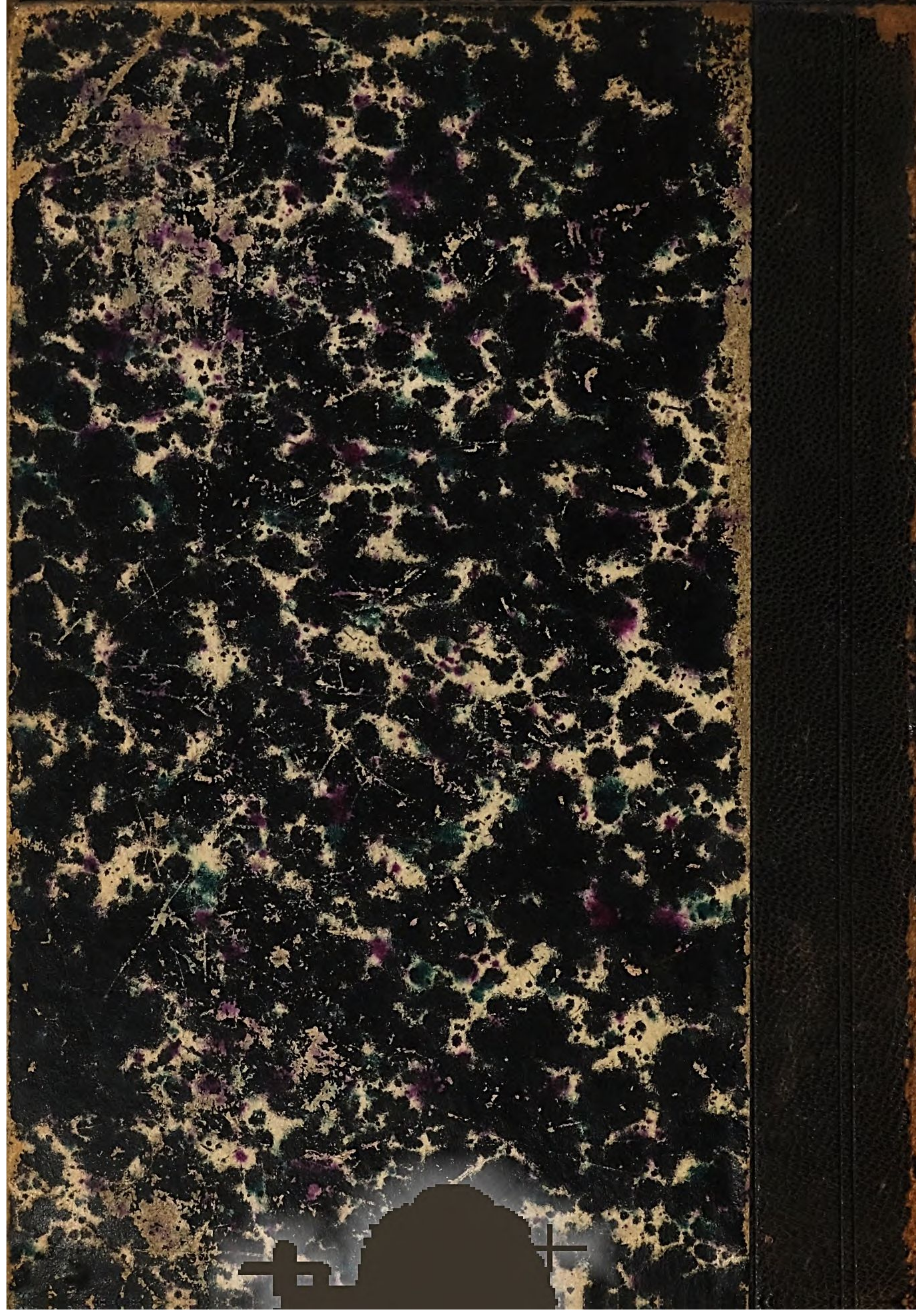
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